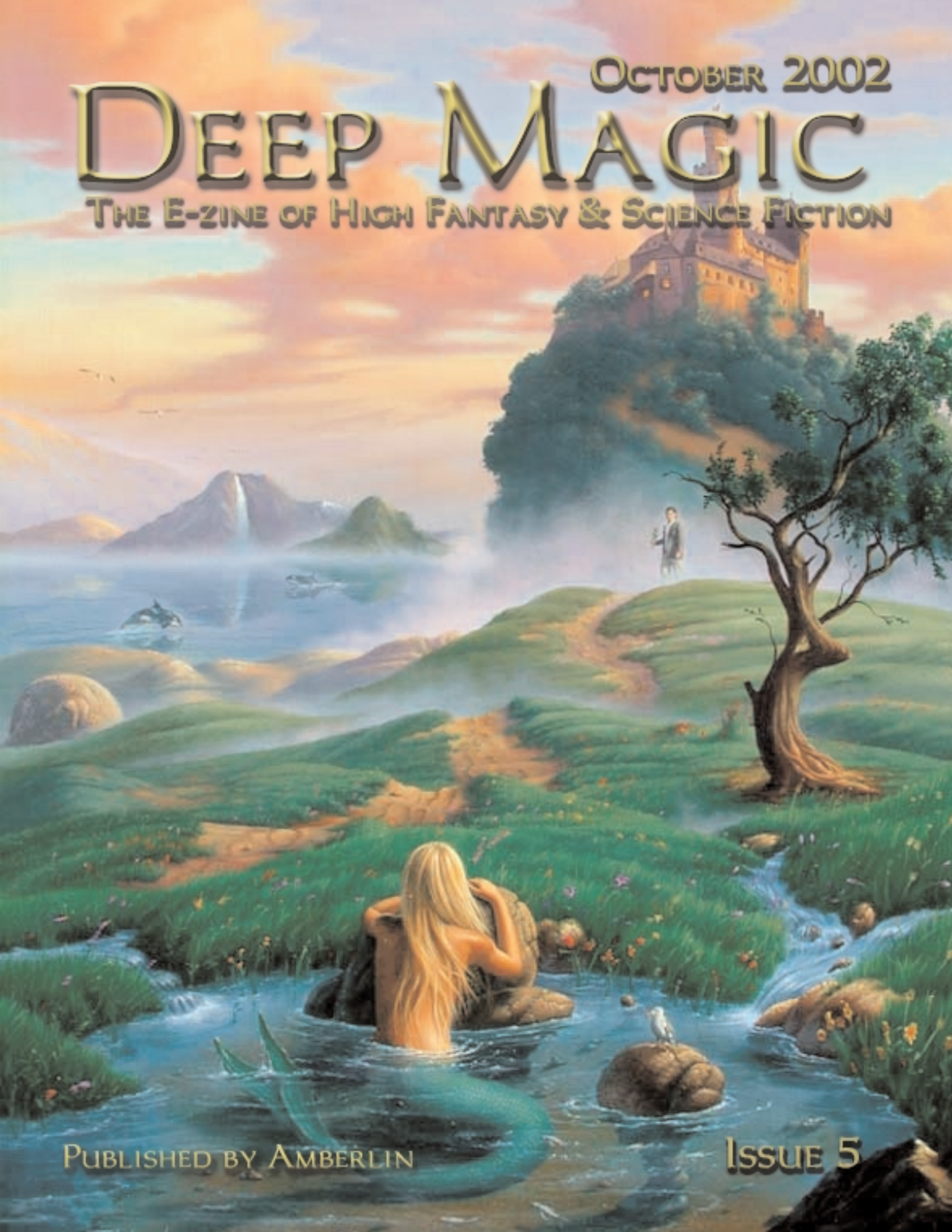

October 2002
Deep Magic
The E-zine of High Fantasy & Science Fiction
Published by Amberlin
Issue 5

Table of Contents

Published by
The Amberlin Group, LLC.

Chief Editor - Jeremy Whitted
Managing Editor - Brendon Taylor
Associate Editor - Jeff Wheeler
Associate Editor - Peter Dahl
Associate Editor - JW Wrenn
Associate Editor - Rochelle Buck
Associate Editor - Joel Brown
Associate Editor - Melissa Thomas

Graphic Design - Jeremy Whitted
Art Director - Jeff Wheeler
Associate Art Director - Reuben Fox

Marketing - Jeff Wheeler
Legal - Brendon Taylor

Website: http://www.deep-magic.net

Feedback: feedback@amberlin.com

Cover by Jim Warren
"The Prince and the Mermaid"

Note From the Editors 3
Poll: Superhero Movies 4
Writing Challenge 5
Fantasy Short: *Disappearing* 10
Article: Top Ten Reasons Why Writing Isn't So Great 11
Artist Interview: Jim Warren 13
Fantasy Prologue: *Maia* 15
Article: The Economics of Being a Fantasy Author 16
Interview: O.R. Savage 19
Fantasy Short: *A Song For the Jakkaryl* 23
Article: Artist For Hire 24
Internal Artwork: Randy Gallegos 26
Science Fiction Novel: *Procyx* 27
Fantasy Novel: *Landmoor* 29

If you are familiar with the internet at all, you know how common dead and broken links are. If you ever try to access a link from this e-zine and it no longer works, don't give up. Go to http://www.deep-magic.net where you will find archives of previous issues. As we catch dead and broken links, we will update our archived issues accordingly. If that is the case, you will find the corrected URL there. If we have not already caught the defective link, please send an email to feedback@amberlin.com, and we will do all we can to track down an updated URL for the information you seek. However, please keep in mind that sometimes content is taken down and is gone forever.

Deep Magic strives to produce and publish morally responsible art and literature. Although great effort has been made to refer our readers to like-minded websites, Deep Magic is not capable of controlling the content in other sites linked to or referenced herein. Thus, Deep Magic encourages its readers to use their own discretion when visiting other sites identified on our site or in Deep Magic: The E-Zine of High Fantasy and Science Fiction.

All Content copyright © 2002
The Amberlin Group, LLC

Note From the Editors

October 2002

Welcome back for another issue of the finest fantasy and science fiction the Deep Magic editors have been able to compile. We greatly appreciate your interest and participation on our Message Boards, polls, and writing challenges. As you have undoubtedly noticed, we have included a pop-up window subscription offer for unsubscribed readers. This has greatly increased our membership. However, in an effort to remain user-friendly, without being obnoxious, we have set the pop-up offer to occur only once every several months. If you ever find that we are not making ourselves as available to you as you would like, or if we are overburdening you with too much attention, please let us know. We like to be good neighbors, and will do our best to honor reader requests.

Our most recent poll requested feedback from our readers about which e-zine sections you value the most. We were intrigued by how popular our articles were, and in particular, how readers appreciated our articles on writing improvement. Not surprisingly, many of you are writers too. In an effort to accommodate your request, we are offering three articles this month (one more than usual), and all are themed upon why we write or produce works of art. Jeff Wheeler and M. Thomas offer contrasting articles on author motivations and the downside of being a writer. *Wizards of the Coast* (Magic) Artist Randy Gallegos offers insight into the life of a freelance fantasy artist. We are further pleased to display a few samples of Mr. Gallegos' fine work in this issue.

We also boast another strong helping of fantasy short stories this month. Author J.T. Slane brings us an action-packed, cliff-hanging prologue, "Maia," which we are confident will leave you wanting more from this fine author. Deep Magic thanks L.E. Erickson for sharing her story, "Disappearing" and Karen Duvall for sharing "A Song for the Jakkaryl." Both are wonderful additions to our e-zine.

The cover art this month is a gorgeous painting by Jim Warren titled, *The Prince & the Mermaid*. Take a look at his interview and other paintings inside this issue.

Many readers have been following Jeff Wheeler's serialized novel, *Landmoor* and O. R. Savage's *Procyx*. We thank you for the feedback you have offered regarding these novels. This month, *Procyx* Book One concludes; next month, *Landmoor* concludes. Book Two of *Procyx* will begin after a short hiatus. However, although *Landmoor* is the first book in a series by Mr. Wheeler, the second book will not follow in serialized form. Amberlin Books, the parent company of Deep Magic, is currently making publication decisions about *Landmoor*. Within this and subsequent issues, you will find opportunities to voice your opinions about *Landmoor* and make suggestions for how Amberlin Books will bring this outstanding story, and any succeeding novels of that series, to you in print. Your voices will be gladly given audience by the principals of Deep Magic as this project progresses. Click here to learn more about the publication of *Landmoor*.

Although the conclusions of *Landmoor* and *Procyx* will leave vacancies in our publication, we are preparing several replacement options that will be presented in the ensuing months.

As we said above, welcome back and please come again.

The Editors
DEEP MAGIC

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Poll: The Best of the Super Hero Movies

Superhero Poll

What is the best comic book superhero movie of all time?

- Batman
- Blade
- Dick Tracy
- Flash Gordon
- Spider-Man
- Superman
- Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles
- Unbreakable
- X-Men
- Other (post your other choices on the Message Board

Most fans of Fantasy enjoy a good comic book movie. These movies have been around nearly as long as the comic books themselves, but it is arguable that Superman brought the big-screen version of the genre to the masses. Then, more than a decade later, Batman reworked the genre and brought it to a new level. Since then, comic book movies have been among the highest grossing films of all time. But which one is best? Time for you to vote and let us know. Some movies didn't make our list (The Phantom, Dark Man, and others), but we put together what we thought were the best, for various reasons. Make your pick, or if you think we've missed a big one, just let us know by voting for "other" and posting your picks on our Message Board. Click the Poll box above to vote on our website.

Results from the September 2002 Poll

What is the most important part of the e-zine to you? (results as of September 21, 2002)

- fantasy short stories: 26.92%
- other articles (reviews, interviews, etc.): 23.08%
- articles for improving your writing: 23.08%
- fantasy novels: 11.54%
- cool artwork: 11.54%
- science fiction short stories: 3.85%
- science fiction novels: 0.00%%

Writing Challenge

Our September writing challenge is in the books. As usual, we received a number of very creative submissions. Not all of them were selected for print, but we want to thank everyone for participating. If you sent one that wasn't printed, don't give up! Keep trying. Below you will find a list of the top choices, decided upon by our panel of editors. Click the titles to jump to the story. We hope you enjoy them. As for next month, we want more submissions. Send your writing challenge submission to writingchallenge@amberlin.com. Submissions are due by the 20th of the month. We will post the top selections next month. In the meantime, here are the September 2002 writing challenge top selections:

Between Three Peaks by Duane B. Frazure

Bones by Gene K. Boyd

October 2002 Challenge

This challenge should be a fun one. One popular aspect of Fantasy involves some type of mystical, fabled item of wonderous power. Maybe it's the "one ring to rule them all" or the sword set in a stone, waiting for the true king to draw it forth. Not only do these items have awesome power, but their histories are shrouded in myth and legend. For the challenge, your task is to create your own item of mystic power. Give it a past, a legend, and a purpose. Be creative, but keep it under 1,000 words.

September 2002 Writing Challenge: Create a unique "scary creature" by description or in a descriptive scene. Fantasy and science fiction often cross lines with other traditional genres: horror, mystery and romance. This challenge asks you to create a little spot of darkness in your otherwise fantasy/sci fi setting. Scare us with your originality.

Between Three Peaks

By Duane B. Frazure

Nestled between the three peaks of Frennbam Pass, a bubbling spring fed into a large, almond-shaped pool. White, polished stones at the bottom of the pool danced in the rippling water and blue-green ribbons of algae swayed with the gentle current. The air was thin and clear, and a blue sky stretched across the horizon. In the middle of summer, the days grew warm, and for a few weeks every now and then, the snows retreated to the tops of the mountain peaks.

On a rare, hot afternoon, Talliah and Javvon traversed the pass on their way to the northern plains where greenridge bears and wildercats hunted herds of penroa. Sometimes, when the summer thistleberries were in season, the bears roamed into the high mountain pass. Talliah warned Javvon to keep his rosewood longbow strung and an arrow at the ready while she hunted for berries among the thorns. They traveled this way until they reached the pool, with its cool waters beckoning.

Sweat dripped from Javvon's golden beard and he wiped his forehead with a hairy forearm; his leather jerkin creaked. Patting an empty waterskin, he said, "let's fill 'em here. Don't know if we'll find any fresh water until the next range."

"That's a good idea, but I've a better one," said Talliah, cradling an apronful of juicy red berries. She blew a lock of brown hair away from her right eye, and then arched her brow.

As red greeted Javvon's cheeks, he tried to ignore the girl.

"I'm not suggesting anything indecent, but we could both use a good washing. Well, you could. There is the smell of uncleaned stables, the odor of rotten mushrooms, and then, there's you."

"I resent that."

"Your leather stinks too." Talliah smiled alluringly.

"Could be bears or cats up here," Javvon warned.

"Cats don't swim." Talliah untied the apron and set the berries near the edge of the water. The clear depths sparkled like the pool was full of diamonds, garnets, and sapphires.

"Bears do… and the cats are smart enough to wait for you to get out."

"Keep your bow close by. It'd make a better story if you killed a greenridge wearing nothing but your dripping small clothes anyway." Talliah dropped her divided skirt to the ground and began unbuttoning her blouse.

Something rustled in the thistles, drawing their attention, but nothing emerged.

Javvon dropped his pack to the ground and began unfastening the bindings on his jerkin. "Your father wouldn't like this."

Wearing enough underclothes to maintain modesty, Talliah dipped a foot into the water. "It's cool, but not cold. I thought it'd be freezing."

"I came through the pass two years ago when the snow was waist deep. The pool wasn't frozen over. I think the mountains were once volcanoes. Maybe they haven't lost all of the fire from their bellies just yet."

Talliah dove into the pool with only a little splash. Scissoring her legs, she surfaced and shook the water from her hair. "Oh, it's wonderful."

Javvon worked at a stubborn left boot as Talliah swam out to the middle of the pool. As she

swam, the sparkles in the water danced around her. Fish. Hundreds of tiny fish swam next to her, glistening like gems. "There are fish out here, Jav. Beautiful little fish." She laughed as she treaded water. They continued to mover around her, like a caressing flow of bubbles. She looked down and saw ring of them swimming around her arm like an ornate crown of glass and diamonds.

After a short while, her legs felt thick and heavy. She wondered if the climb had tired her more than she expected. Then, her arms stiffened and she could hardly move. Her head lowered, to where her nose was just above the water level.

"Everything okay?" Javvon asked from the bank. His trousers were nearly off.

Talliah tried to call out, but could not. She was sinking. Her jaw locked shut and her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. It felt swollen and hurt. The fish started to nibble at her legs and arms. Sharp little teeth ripped tiny chunks of skin in hundreds of places at once. The pain was excruciating. Talliah tried to cry for help, but… the pain.

Javvon stood, not quite down to his small clothes. "I asked if you were okay, Tal…" He saw her head bobbing under the water and jumped in and swam furiously toward her.

Talliah could hear his splashes, the only sounds in the pass. All else was silent around them. The pain…

When Javvon reached her in the middle of the pool, red stained the perfect water and the glittering fish frenzied about. Talliah's eyes were open, but the stare was vacant. He put an arm around her shoulder to pull her along and felt raw flesh next to his arm. He kicked hard, trying to pull them both to shore as quickly as possible. She could not die. Then, his legs felt heavy and he struggled in the water. He would not let go.

Javvon pulled with his arms and splashed frantically to reach the edge. It was only a few feet away. His foot felt the bottom of the pool and he looked down. He could barely move his legs, and his right foot caught on a white stone. With all the might he could muster, he pulled his leg up with his free hand. The stone tumbled away, revealing vacant sockets where eyes once rested. His arms gave way as he tried to pull himself up.

Slowly, he sank back into the deeper water.

Bones

By Gene K. Boyd

I stood outside the bathroom door, swaying. The ringing in my ears pulsated in time with my my heartbeat. The ache at the back of my head, where Daniella had clubbed me, was constant.

"Open the door, Steve," she said.

She had tied my hands in front of me, so I had to fumble a bit to turn the doorknob. When the door swung open, I gagged at the slaughterhouse stench of blood and entrails.

The bathroom was spattered with blood. The bathtub held a jumble of unidentifiable red-brown objects. Some of them were stick-like, some were curved planes, some were shaped like...Realization hit me like a fist in the gut -- they were human bones. The red-brown was drying blood.

I turned to stare at her. I had to swallow before I could speak. "Daniella..."

She smiled the way a cobra might smile if it could. "Call me Akitnu."

"What? I don't understand..."

"Of course you don't. I'm going to tell you a story. You probably still won't understand, though."

"Daniella, I..."

"Shut up and listen. I might answer a question or two later.

"Centuries ago, there was a wizard who needed a disguise to fool the eyes of an enemy and the noses of his guard dogs. The wizard summoned a demon and forced the evil creature to provide him with the disguise.

"The demon gave the wizard a magical casket, then told the wizard to lie in it. When he did, the demon removed the wizard's bones in a magical way that left the wizard alive.

"The demon said, Bring one of your enemy's servants here. Place him in the casket. Cut out his bones and place your own within his flesh. You will then be able to enter your enemy's camp without fear. Do it before the sun rises again, or die.

"That night, the wizard's skeleton walked to the place where his enemy's servant lay sleeping. In the morning, the wizard saw the world through the servant's eyes.

"It took the wizard five days to complete his task. He returned to his lair to find that his own body was a dead, rotting mass of maggot-food. He summoned the demon and demanded an explanation for the treachery.

"The demon said, Do not accuse me of treachery. You know I am forbidden to lie. Had you asked, I would have told you that the flesh would die three days after you left it.

"The wizard asked, Must I live the rest of my days in this body?

"The demon said, So it seems.

"The wizard knew secrets that had allowed him to cheat death for an astoundingly long time. He said, Tell me, Foul One, will this body live for as long as my own would have?

"The demon said, That flesh will die a year and a day after you donned it.

"The wizard asked, How can I live beyond that time?

"The demon said, If you lie in yon casket when the flesh dies, and stay there it until it rots away, your bones will be free to seek other flesh.

"The wizard said, And that flesh...?

"The demon said, It will live for a year and a day. I am commanded to warn you, wizard. If the flesh you wear is not in yon casket when it dies, and if it does not lie there until only bones remain, you will die like a mortal man. Then my Master will give your soul to me."

Daniella smiled a serpent's smile. "What do you think of my story?"

"It's crazy. What's happened to you?"

"If you think the story was crazy, what will you think of this?"

She held up her left hand, palm facing me. There were half- healed incisions running down her fingers. They joined to form a single line in the center of he palm. That line ran down her wrist and disappeared beneath the sleeve of her blouse.

She grasped her left hand with her right and wrenched it. There was a wet, ripping sound. The flesh of her left hand hung from her wrist like an empty glove. She waggled bloody, bony fingers. Blood dripped onto the floor tiles.

"What do you think of that, Steve? Is it any crazier than my story?"

My mouth was dry and filled with the metallic taste of fear. Finally, I managed to croak, "Daniella... is she dead?"

"I can bring her back. Would you like that?"

I nodded.

"Then bring me another body. I wanted a man's body, but I had to take hers." She smiled again. "It seems that people have grown bigger in the last century or so. Hers was the body into which my bones would fit. Bring me a man of her height before the cuts on this body heal. Then I will restore your Daniella."

Disappearing
By L.E. Erickson

"Girl!"

Elspeth jumped—Tulaine's voice was no gentler than the caw of an angry crow. The thimble slipped, and the heavy needle Elspeth was using on the brocaded gown jabbed into her finger. Before she could get her hands away from the dress, blood seeped into it. It was barely noticeable against the murrey fabric.

"Where is your head?!"

It was like listening to a whip crack, but Elspeth was deep enough in her daydreams of The Here that she only blinked. And then, when she did comprehend her sister-in-law's question, she stifled a laugh.

One of these times you're just going to fade away . . . Disappear altogether.

It would be right here atop my neck, I suspect. Elspeth heard Bertam's lazy, unaffected voice clearly in her head, even though he was... well, however far away from Archester it was to The Here.

As Elspeth's dreams faded, the dull buzz of voices on the street outside rubbed at her. She smelled dust and heat and felt the beading of sweat on her scalp and the small of her back. Reality, in all its half-dead splendor.

"I've been talking at you for five minutes now!" Tulaine glared. Peter's eyes were gray, too, but they'd never reminded Elspeth of steel. "You're somewhere else almost always these days," Tulaine scolded. "You and that foolish child of yours, just alike."

Elspeth frowned at the mention of Annie.

Too much work, too much wool-gathering, too much of just getting by to spend as much time as I ought with her. Especially now.

"What Peter saw in you..."

Tulaine paused to cluck and shake her head. Elspeth flinched at the use of past tense in reference to her husband.

"Sees," she corrected. He'd gone off to war. It didn't mean he had to die.

Tulaine looked sharply at her, but before she could scold any more, Elspeth smiled her best meek and apologetic smile. "What was it you were wanting to tell me?"

"One of these times you're just going to fade away," Tulaine grumbled. "Disappear altogether. I *said* the midday bells just rang, though how you missed hearing them I'll never know. That gown you're fiddling with needs to be finished an hour ago, and the blue taffeta should have been started yesterday in order to be..."

Disappear.

Elspeth barely heard the rest. A small bead of icy uncertainty formed in the pit of her stomach.

Tulaine broke off in mid-diatribe, suddenly aware that the object of her scolding wasn't listening. Again. "May the gods have mercy!" she groaned, and spread her hands in a gesture of exasperation. "Give the brocade to me and go lay out the fabric for the taffeta. And for mercy's sake,

Click here to continue on page 35

Top Ten Reasons Why Being a Published Fantasy Author Isn't So Great

By M. Thomas

It has occurred to me, having attempted publishing for nearly two decades now, that I've been deceived. I've been blinded by all the glossy covers of my favorite fantasy books lined up on the shelves, like little orphans begging me to take them home.

It seems time I take a step back to really think about this pursuit of writing. A little clarity is in order, I believe. Some consideration of how being a published fantasy author might not be the most convenient thing in the world. I mean, there must be some drawbacks. It can't all be wine and roses. After extensive research (twenty minutes or so on a search engine during a bout of writer's block), I began to see elements of inconvenience – the dark underbelly of being a published writer that everyone keeps silent about. I have listed them here, as fair warning to others.

1. You have to write your own author bio. When I was a child, I always assumed there was a special person within the publishing company whose job it was to concoct the bios based on their admiration for the author. In actuality, most authors write their own bios for their books. I can barely write a synopsis about my book, much less distill my entire life into one paragraph.

2. Cover Art. Authors don't really get much say in their cover art, and I'd imagine publishers probably frown on your 5-year-old's delightful stick figures and blobs for the "bad elves." Whereas you might imagine a montage of symbolic images representing the breadth and scope of your genre-altering masterpiece, what you're more likely to get is a scantily clad woman standing next to a warrior with an improbable amount of muscles holding a looong sword, tee hee. Fantasy cover art isn't known for its sensual subtlety.

After extensive research ... I began to see ... the dark underbelly of being a published writer that everyone keeps silent about.

3. The dedication in the front of the book. You've got to come up with a way to thank all the people who helped you, from your devoted spouse to the household cat. The eighth-grade teacher who encouraged you to write, no matter what. Your parents, who let you move back into the house after college when the Great Literary Career you planned didn't pan out right away. The workshop members who cheered you on through predictable plot moments and bad dialogue. Yada, yada, yada.

4. Extra copies of your work. Some magazine publishers pay with copies of the magazine, and a book publisher is always likely to throw a few copies of the completed work into the mail for you to peruse. However, everyone you'd want to give one too probably a) has heard about the work in detail for the last two-to-ten years since it was just an idea, and b) already has your autograph on various holiday cards anyway.

5. You can't pay your bills with books. By now we all know that being an author doesn't pay all that much, unless you become a superstar. Go ahead. Try mailing your book to the local utility company for next month's bill and see what they say.

Dear Sir. Thank you for your extraordinary supply of electricity. I am enclosing a check for $22.73 to cover the first part of the bill, as well as a copy of my newly published novel to cover the rest. The paperback version retails for $6.75. I have also signed it, which in ten years or more, depending on market fluctuations and reader interest, could multiply the value of the book 10 times. Therefore, this book's actual worth is valued at $60.75, which should bring my account balance to zero.

6. Fan mail. Authors are busy people too. You don't get fan mail right now, do you? And you've barely got time to write as it is. Be glad you don't have to answer all those questions about how you came up with this or that, share the secret of your success, or pass along a good dwarfish recipe for scabies. Besides, consider the price of stamps these days.
7. Autographs. If you haven't been doodling it in the corner of the sales report for years already, you're going to have to begin practicing your autograph for those book signings. This can cause a lot of strain to a wrist that has been otherwise relieved of longhand for years, since the computer keyboard came around. Better just get a splint now.
8. Sudden desirability as a speaker. People may want to book you for speaking engagements. There goes your active social life. You know, the one you have in-between work and writing.
9. Fans. People may come up to you at genre-related conferences, dressed as one of your characters, and be disappointed when you don't recognize them. Imagine this scenario:

YOU: And who should I make the dedication to?
FAN: (Grin fades. Leans over to hiss conspiratorially in your ear.) It's me. You know. Greybeard Magicfellow. Look, I've even got the magic crystal. The one I used to defeat the hordes of Amadogwa. (Produces small, plastic prism on a chain, probably stolen from someone's rear-view mirror.)
YOU: (Smile weakly.) Ah ha. Yes, I see. With the beard, and the, er, baseball cap.
FAN: I'm in disguise, of course. Couldn't very well bring my Impervious Cloak to the conference, could I? You never know where Amadogwa is going to show up these days.
YOU: (Motioning for security.) Yes. Amadogwa. Clever bugger. Oh. I think you've dropped your crystal in my coffee.

10. Loss of your former life. If you do become successful, you'll have to quit your job to write full-time. So much for the spiritual sustenance of commuting, microwave lunches, fluorescent lighting, cubicle walls covered in short carpet, and that phone thingy that sticks in your ear like some sort of bizarre, Elvin jewelry. Now all you've got to look forward to is being paid to pursue your dream. Where's the character-building conflict in that?

As you can see, there is a seamier side to being a published fantasy author that has been well-hidden by all the hype. My final thought is: Writer, beware. It takes great fortitude to weather such obstacles. But if you consider yourself to be up to the challenge, by all means, forge ahead. Just don't say I didn't warn you.

Jim Warren

Age: 52
Residence: Florida
Marital Status: Married
Children: Girl (Drew 10), Boy (Arte 7)
Hobbies: Painting, playing games and sports with the kids, movies, Disney World
Personal Quote: "Hell with the rules, paint what you like"
Favorite Book or Author: Dianetics by L. Ron Hubbard
Started Painting In: 1967
Artist Most Inspired By: Dali, Margitte, Normal Rockwell, Rembrant
Mediums You Work In: Oil on canvas
Educational/Training Background: No art schools
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Over 30 Wyland galleries, mostly in Florida, California and Hawaii
Website URL: www.jimwarren.com

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I loved to draw and was rather bored in school, so I spent my class time drawing, then painting, which were immediately being bought by classmates for 25 cents.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: Surreal/fantasy, but I best describe it as The Art of Jim Warren, which I used as the title for my first book.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: From things I obseve in life such as religion, war, personal

relationships, and also from just seeing the oceans and nature.

Q: What inspired this piece? (The cover art)
A: I have often seen in movies the theme of romance, where someone is in love but physical circumstances don't allow them to be together, other than in mind and spirit. It's about love that is so close yet so far away.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: The beach, nature, and people and art that I have seen as I grew up.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: There have been many, sort of a ladder of successes, but the grammy award-winning album cover for Bob Seger's Against the Wind was probably the biggest exposure for one single painting.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: I'm not sure, but I would like to see, and hope that my art influences, more reality-based themes that everyone can relate to, not just fantasy/sci-fi fans. I have always liked the fantasy and surreal themes in art, but I personally want a more human/earthly touch, which I believe many people notice from the response I get in e-mails.

Maia
By J.T. Slain

The prow of the *Blessing of Burntisland* pitched so brutally that a sailor near her toppled over the gunwale. Salt water silenced his scream and foamed up on the deck, forcing the other seamen to lunge for ropes before losing their footing as well. Maia clutched the webs of rigging, digging her fists into the slick ropes as a wave crashed against the hull, dousing her thoroughly. She tried to breathe and started choking. The wind and rain lashed the sails, spinning the lanyards in a frenzy of wind and hurling curses every direction.

"Are you all right?" A hand gripped her arm to steady her.

Maia nodded, coughing until she vomited, and finally felt the salty air go in right. Another lurch nearly threw her overboard. Holding on to the rigging tortured her arms.

"The dinghy is bobbing like a cork!" He pitched his voice to a yell to be heard over the storm and cursing sailors. "This is as close as we're going to get to the rocks. We can't see a safe way to shore yet. Must we do this?"

"There is no other way!" Maia shouted. She tried to look up at the Kishion, but the salt stung her eyes.

"Give me your hand. I'll help you down the ladder. Come on, we haven't time to waste on this! Give me your hand!"

The Kystrel around her neck felt as heavy as an iron yoke instead of the small bronze medallion it was.

Maia pried hers loose from the rigging and felt certain the ship would tilt again and send her into the sea. The Kystrel around her neck felt as heavy as an iron yoke instead of the small bronze medallion it was. It burned against her skin, its magic seething like the storm's fury – the whispers in her mind. It wanted her to use it. It could banish the storm and calm the waves. She struggled against the urge, biting it down like she would a bad-tasting onion. Not in front of the sailors. Not in front of the soldiers. They would kill her on the spot if they knew she wore one.

The assassin who was her protector hooked his arm around hers and pulled her after him. She slipped on the wet deck and went down. Her skirts were already soaked through and her cloak threatened to choke her as it flapped in the wind.

"Get up, woman! Take my hand like I told you!"

Maia grasped his callused hand and forced herself to her feet again. The Kishion brought her along the rail, clutching a guideline until they reached the rope ladder. Five soldiers had boarded in the dinghy already, battling to keep far enough from the jostling ship that it didn't smash into them. Fear shook her resolve. The rope was slick and narrow. She had never done anything like this in her life.

"Here, I'm tying this around you in case you fall. Raise your arms so I can get this around… very good, there we go. I can't carry you down there. Do your best not to fall."

Maia nodded and bit her lip. She steeled herself, feeling the tickle of a cough threaten to rise up and break through. She wiped her mouth and then slid her leg over the rail. Another wave bullied the ship and she found herself gripping the rope ladder for her life. The leather soles over her

Click here to continue on page 45

THE ECONOMICS OF BEING A FANTASY AUTHOR

BY JEFF WHEELER

I have a good paying job at a high-tech company, and I love to write fantasy novels. I've often daydreamed about what it would be like to actually become a real published author as my day job. Ahh, the glory of it...having readers write fan letters, being paid to sit and vent my dreams on a computer screen, going to book signings and having people think I'm brilliant or naming their children after my characters. Then I wake up and get back to work at my day job, which is researching labor markets around the world.

But what exactly are the economics of being a real fantasy writer? What if I end up earning less as a published author than I do right now? Would I really even want quit my job and end up scrimping to pay the bills? I decided to investigate the economics of it and chat with some peers who are also fantasy or science fiction writers and are in the same position as I am.

What if I end up earning less as a published author than I do right now? Would I really even want quit my job and end up scrimping to pay the bills?

First: the economics.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that the mean annual salary of writers and authors is $47,000 a year (USD). That's just shy of $23 an hour. I guess the good news is that this amount is more than the editors make! I was surprised to discover that authors and writers only comprise 1/10,000th of the population. There are 41,410 in the United States. Sounds like a lot, doesn't it? But consider that there are also:

- 2,189,670 registered nurses (one of the highest employment figures)
- 1,409,140 elementary school teachers
- 505,500 dishwashers
- 104,210 editors
- 41,410 writers and authors
- 2,600 rock splitters
- 1,880 historians
- 910 astronomers (one of the lowest employment figures)

source: Occupational Employment Statistics Survey by Occupation, 2000 – Bureau of Labor Statistics

As economics goes, there are roughly 2.5 editors for every writer in the United States. It takes a lot of editors to mail all those rejection letters and carry manuscripts to the recycling bins – a sense of humor is healthy, folks, especially in this industry. Just remember where the revenue goes from publishing a book. Look at how many jobs those published novels have to support, not to mention the expense of equipment, storage, shipping, advertising, etc.

How many of you have browsed the sci-fi/fantasy rows at the library or Barnes & Noble and seen the hundreds of published authors in this genre alone? They don't all catch lightning in a bottle like JK Rowling. How many of them can live off the advances? Do they ever start earning royalties? One of my favorite authors is Sharon Kay Penman – she writes historical fiction – and she told me

that the majority of writers never earn royalties. The cost of the advance is an estimated amount based on potential future royalties, and most rarely hit that threshold.

I wondered how many other aspiring fantasy or science fiction authors recognized these economics. While publishing DEEP MAGIC and trying to attract authors here, I have spent some time thinking about the glory of the paying short story markets – Analog, Asimov, Magazine of Fantay & Science Fiction – the prestigious markets. These markets pay 5-8 cents a word. If I landed a 25,000-word short (or novella) with one of those magazines (instead of DEEP MAGIC), I could earn up to $1250 USD. Hmmm....only $1250. Not exactly enough to pay my mortgage for a month, let alone the year. It would be a huge ego boost, of course, but not a consistent income. My sister-in-law just won $44,000 as a contestant on Wheel of Fortune. That kind of put a new perspective on it for me. How many stories would I have to write, and have hit the paying market enough times, to make it viable or predictable? With my day job, I don't have to sweat about whether or not I'll get an acceptance letter this month.

With the economics not necessarily being in my favor, why do I write stories? Why do I write novels? Is a $1250 check really the reward I want? Or is it to have a reader tell me that they loved my story and want to see more of my work?

Being a researcher by profession, I decided to ask my fellow writing colleagues: What is your carrot? What is it that really keeps you writing? Are we all standing out in a lightning storm and holding up our bottles? I doubted that any of us were truly expecting to be the next Rowling. But I was willing to accept that it was a wrong assumption and thought I should ask before coming up with any of my own conclusions. I wanted to know if they had ever considered that the reality of being a published author might not be enough to turn it into a day job.

For those who are interested, here are the results (condensed from the e-mail responses I received from these folks… I have included their comments anonymously at the end of this article):

Writing is my (pick one): addiction/mental disorder/God-complex:	7
Writing makes me happy:	6
Writing for others to read my work:	2
Writing is my career:	1
Writing for my own entertainment:	1

The conclusion was pretty clear. Most of us who write do so because of some inherent satisfaction we get from it. It is not because it is a promising source of income, fame, or sanity. For many, it seems to be an obsessive-compulsive behavior. Be that as it may, you are reading this e-zine (or have been) because of the works authors like these have brought you.

I would like to ask you for a personal favor.

Yes, you – the one reading this page right now. I ask for this favor as one of the publishers of DEEP MAGIC, not as one of its authors. We would like to attract the best talent imaginable here. You aren't paying us, so we can't pay them. But there is something you can give that will help us attract and retain good writers for this e-zine. What I want from you is your applause.

Have you ever gone to see a Broadway production (like Phantom of the Opera, Les Miserables, or Miss Saigon) or a concert? At the end of the show, the audience gives a round of applause. Sometimes, if the clapping is loud enough, we get an encore by the performer. I have seen that happen. It's exhilarating.

This is what I want you to do.

I would like you to take a few minutes at the end of each issue of DEEP MAGIC, go to our Message Board, and leave a note for the one story or chapter or artwork that you personally enjoyed the most. Give that performer your applause by leaving a short message for them on the Message Board.

I believe that if you do this, DEEP MAGIC will have no trouble getting authors to write for you. Good authors…the best authors. It won't cost you anything more than a few minutes. If all of you do this, then your words become something we can give our contributing authors that the big 8-cent-per-word magazine publishers don't offer. And maybe your applause will bring our best authors back with more stories. Again, I'm not asking you to comment on every story. Just your favorite one. Believe it or not, those few comments of positive feedback are incredibly powerful and motivating.

And I'll say that as a fantasy writer.

Read the email responses from Jeff Wheeler's study, continued on page 31.

O.R. Savage

Age: 58
Residence: Bountiful, Utah
Marital Status: Married
Children: 2
Hobbies: Building flight simulators, writing, audio production, painting, CGI creation
Personal Quote: "Things seldom suffer from being cut." — Luacine C. Fox
Favorite Book or Author: When Worlds Collide, Foundation Trilogy, Chronicles of Narnia, Lord of the Rings, War of The Worlds, I Robot, Gordon R. Dickson's Childe Cycle
First time you tried to get something published: short stories, novel sent to both local and east coast publishers. Got back an occasional personalized rejection with some encouragement to keep going. Missed publication of one story solely because deadline for submission was missed.
Authors Most Influenced By: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, A. E. Van Vogt, Orson Scott Card; Robert Heinlein; Poul Anderson; Henry Kuttner; Cordwainer Smith
Educational/Training Background: University of Utah (studied under Orson Scott Card in 1970's). Degrees: Bachelor of Science - Mass Communications
Published works (fiction/non-fiction/obituaries): Illustration for "Dragons of Darkness," edited by Orson Scott Card.
Website URL: TBA

There may be some that will say that mixing traditional 'science' and traditional 'religion' as legitimate powers *is* a taboo.

Q: Tell us about your day-job?
A: Involved in High Definition digital television production. Shoot video using a cine-alta HDW-950 by Sony (the same camera used by Lucasfilm to shoot "Attack of The Clones.")

Q: Tell us about the origin of your novel, *Procyx*? How did you come up with the story? What was the process and development that transformed that idea into a complete novel (trilogy, series, etc.)?
A: I began *Procyx* after an anthropology class. The work originated as a short story about astro-archaeologists that uncover remains on Mhyrn. I used Austrailopithicene and Olduvai Gorge as a model. The story was fabricated from that. Next, I expanded it into a textbook-like compilation of data. Then Palmer wound up getting involved on Ahrgol and the story took off from there. The first draft is quite different from what you see now. Originally it was all one work, but subsequent rewrites broke it into three parts. The first part concerns Palmer and Gaultor. The second, what happened to the artifacts Ambylor found missing at the shrine (see prologue to Book One), and the third brings everything together. The first draft was written in 1973. Subsequent stories, set in the *Procyx* universe, have prompted some of the changes in the later rewrites that constitute the work at present.

Q: Where do your get the ideas or inspiration for your work?
A: "Right-braining;" a clip of music or a thought; discussions with my brother; religious principles;

selected sections from ancient texts (i.e Books of Enoch and other Apocryphal works; life's situations.

Q: Do you have any favorite characters?
A: Gaultor, Reeber, Goren and Korday (the latter three appear in later books)

Q: What influences have helped you become the writer you are?
A: Growing up in a broadcasting and theater environment where creativity was encouraged and supported. Coupled with this is involvement in planetarium show production, filmmaking and even radio drama projects.

Q: What have you been reading lately?
A: Scriptures, Lord of The Rings, and A. E. Van Vogt's classics

Q: How much of your time do devote to writing?
A: Not enough, but then I have both other responsibilities (family, job and church) and other interests (see hobbies above). All these help feed me, too. It's also helpful to go to one of these when I get writer's block. I try to write something every day, even if it's only a paragraph or so.

Q: When you have a time where you don't think you can write another word, what is it that gets you going again?
A: Any number of things can stop you: illness, unemployment, divorce, death in the family or other tough experiences. For these, time passing can help. As for the everyday writers block (I assume that's more what you're asking about) I leave the writing, do something utterly unrelated and let my unconscious mind have a chance to work its way back into the process. I've often wondered if writer's block isn't something as simple as the conscious mind refusing to listen to the unconscious. You must have both. As I mentioned above I go to other sources of expression or comfort in my life. Even menial work is good. I've had some great ideas pop up while I'm mowing the lawn. Listening to music helps me a lot with this, too. It's food for the unconscious. I carefully choose the music I listen to, though. If I don't feel uplifted by it then I've probably chosen junk food—it may taste good but it doesn't nourish.

Q: What is your motivating factor for writing? What keeps you doing it? Do you think it will ever be your day-job? What's the trade off?
A: I'm discontented with the world and dream dreams. The worlds of story should be a safe place to which one can escape. Too often, people criticize this notion. "Why it's just escapist literature. It's not serious." C. S Lewis once asked Tolkien this question about escapism, and I paraphrase: "What group of people would be most disturbed by and obsessed with the idea of escape?" He then answers his own question: "jailers." Getting "off world" is an escape and I can build whatever I can imagine. My great hope is that what I dream has value to others and can take them away from the pains of life, too, even if only for a while. As for whether I think it will ever replace my day job, I'm afraid the answer is "no."

Q: Give us a peek at what else is up your sleeve? (Sequels? New worlds?)
A: The Procyx phenomenon is referred to as "The End Star." In *Procyx* it is called the "EndStar of

Grief." At one point in one of the future books, Gaultor makes a passing allusion to another incarnation of the Procyx phenomenon as the "EndStar of Joy." That's a story I've already begun work on. I'm looking at a series of stories/novels set in or concerning the "Third Empire" and the "Dawn Era." There's also a smattering of short stories set in the *Procyx* universe. These include "RimStar" stories and the "Warriors of Light" series.

Q: In *Procyx*, you mix 'science and religion' as legitimate powers in your universe. Isn't that taboo in the genre?
A: Why? I've read treatises on what the genre is from a variety of SF authors over the years. Science Fiction is touted as the literature of "What If?" and there's a wide berth afforded for all kinds of exploration. SF isn't just about space ships, robots and time travel. Asimov's classic short story "The Last Question" has fun exploring how God might have come to be and near the end it's hard to discern between technology and metaphysics or, dare I say the "S" word . . . spirituality? With SF, anything goes, or should be able to go.

Part of this discussion depends on your definition of religion. I see religion in SF all the time: the religion of Atheism; the religion of Evolution; the religion of Science, are but a few. Each has its worshippers. Each has its canons. Each has its believers, and they all share an unspoken tenant among them: God was invented by humans. They needed a way to understand and have comfort in facing the experience of death. Or, If He exists at all it is in the form of 'the laws of the universe and the order found there.' That's all. Any possibility of a real, conscious being, a "personal" God directing anything is, at best, quaint and merely a crutch for the weak-minded. Far too often, enlightenment equals Atheism. God is an artifact of the Dark Ages, easily dismissed by the bold discoveries of brilliant men. But once God is disposed of, what's left to fill that yearning for a higher power apparently inherent in all human societies? There is no hesitation to mix the "religious beliefs" of the latest "enlightened disciplines" into stories to fill that void – to re-invent God in the image of the discipline. My own experience has taught me that we shouldn't be too quick to throw out everything just because some new things have been discovered that don't seem to fit the old. It's the old "baby and the bath water" thing.

As to the matter of the taboo, there may be some that will say that mixing traditional 'science' and traditional 'religion' as legitimate powers *is* a taboo. Mixing the two may be unpopular and I'm confident I'd be laughed or booed out of some halls filled with SF fans. That's okay. I consider the question pretty fundamental and probably not looked at in quite this way. I leave it for you to decide. Does it fit inside the genre? It's got space ships in it, galactic nations, genetic engineering and a working priesthood that rivals in power all these others put together. Does that sound like SF, or fantasy? If it still bothers the SF purists, maybe some other label should be coined: Science Fantasy or Space Fantasy. Sound better? Sound pretentious? I don't know. For now, Science Fiction works fine for me. *Procyx* explores a universe where science and religion mix as legitimate powers. Have fun exploring it.

Q: Is Hypermotility a metaphor for anything?
A: I used to pooh-pooh allegory and metaphors and cajole the "hidden meanings" in literature. That was before I read "The Chronicles of Narnia." Bingo. I began to understand their power to communicate.

I can see several metaphors in Hypermotility. *Procyx* was begun decades ago. When I first started writing it I didn't consciously intend any metaphors for it. That was before Narnia. But as

the work developed, other metaphors and allegories began showing up, seemingly accidentally. I say "seemingly accidentally" because I think the unconscious mind, which deals almost exclusively in symbolism and metaphor, has a way of sneaking these things into the conscious mind in the form of "an idea." This is particularly true as part of any creative process or problem solving. In some ways, the unconscious is wiser than the conscious. I don't see these intrusions as a bad thing. The unconscious also exists to help make sense of a world constantly in change, and to protect the conscious mind from things it can't handle or thinks it can't handle. Dreams may be a dress rehearsal for some crises, but I digress.

To the unconscious mind, everything poured in is perceived as reality, whether fantasy or events experienced in the real world. The unconscious mind makes no distinction. I know that certain forms of psychotherapy use this fact to help people stop destructive pathologies by careful reconstruction of what the unconscious perceives as reality. I don't want to get too deep into that here. The unconscious deals in metaphor, suggesting to me that one major reason stories appeal to us is because they speak to both the conscious and unconscious minds simultaneously.
A metaphor can appear in a story and it may be years before the author himself (or herself) sees it. (That's actually what happened to me with HyperM.) So I am careful to not dismiss any metaphors I discover too soon. It may provide a significant dimension: my unconscious trying to speak to yours. So, I weigh any that I can see. Some I keep, others I discard. The conscious mind has to be the boss, here. The ones I recognize as valuable and keep I even expand on. If *you* see a metaphor or metaphors, great. I think it can increase the depth of the experience for you. If not, that's fine too. I would hope the story functions on its own without having to see *any* metaphor for it to work.
I'm not going to share what metaphors I see. The story is partly yours now, you see. My telling would be too heavy handed. It may be too heavy handed as it is.

Q: Why did you let DEEP MAGIC publish this novel? There are other avenues in the publishing industry you could have chosen.
A: There are several reasons, but key among them is that I am drawn to DEEP MAGIC'S editorial policies and serious sense of responsibility for what it publishes. There are far too few "safe places for minds to wander" in the world any more, and, sadly, growing fewer by the day.

Part of the answer goes back to biases of "the enlightened" again. It seems an ever-increasing number of big thinkers dislike the very notion of a "Supreme Creator." This bias translates into the literature of the day. It may be, in part, that believing in a "Supreme Being" means that He is involved with all aspects of the universe, life on earth and everywhere else. It also means that He probably has some suggestions as to how we might best live our lives. Because "the enlightened" control virtually all of what we see, read and hear, it's very hard to get a hearing on anything outside the "enlightened" view. Profit, also, drives everything in this world. Some of "the enlightened" will only publish what they think will sell and they quietly insist that it fit inside their philosophy, which includes resisting the notion of accountability for one's actions to a Supreme Being. Such, they say, belongs in the past, so naturally, God has to go too. He's the foundation of it all. "Why, do you know how many wars have been fought in the name of God!?" This argument is supposed to settle the matter. Actually, *men* fought those wars—fallible men who lost sight of His teachings or went past the mark into fanaticism. We're struggling with that mentality today. None of this is new. It's actually been around since the beginning. DEEP MAGIC has demonstrated an open mind on the subject.

A Song For the Jakkaryl

By Karen Duvall

A streak of blue flashed across the rutted path and disappeared into a cluster of thorny bushes. Leaves the color and size of silver thimbles burst from the plants and scattered in the breeze, making a sound like tinkling bells.

"There!" Gabby scrambled forward, stopping short of toppling onto the spiky branches that hid what she hunted for. "Did you see it? It went in there. Shya, run to the other side and block its escape."

The Shya'ling, a winged companion that had befriended Gabby's family over a century ago, hovered at her side. "That will do no good, mistress. We have already tried…"

"So we'll try again!" Gabby thrust her gloved hand into a narrow opening between the branches, then quickly snatched it back. The ripped sleeve of her green tunic slipped aside, the long, jagged scratch from a thorn already starting to bleed. "Vetta's ghost!"

"No need to swear," Shya said calmly. "We will catch it. We came close, twice. But a Jakkaryl is not easily tricked."

It stood on the trail, watching her and Shya, seemingly unafraid as it cocked its blue head to study them with interest.

Gabby cradled her arm against her chest and plopped down onto the prickly grass beside the bush. No, the Jakkaryl would not be caught with ease. It was a cunning creature, no larger than a kitchen rat, but far faster on its two legs than a rodent with four.

"There's so little time left, Shya. The sun-star will reach its zenith in less than two shadow's time. If I don't take the Jakkaryl to King Uln by then, my brother will…" She couldn't finish. Saying the words would make the threat to Galen's life even more real.

Shya perched beside her. He folded his great wings, the green and gold pattern of feathers and scales shimmering in the daylight. Though only half Gabby's height when standing, his large, beaked head came even with hers as she sat hunched over her bent knees. Her torn britches exposed the scrapes and bruises beneath, three-days worth of dirt crusting over the scabs.

"I've failed, Shya," Gabby muttered into her knees. "My brother's as good as dead."

A ruff of feathers rose like hackles from the back of Shya's neck. He grunted. "I have never known you to give up."

She lifted her head to stare at him. "What haven't I tried? The Jakkaryl can't be caught. King Uln knew that, yet he sent me on this doomed quest just the same. No one, royal or peasant, man or woman, has ever succeeded in capturing one of the creatures. I'd have thought they didn't exist had I not seen one for myself."

Only yesterday, the second day of her journey, did Gabby see the elusive Jakkaryl for the first time. It stood on the trail, watching her and Shya, seemingly unafraid as it cocked its blue head to study them with interest. The tiny creature appeared more human than animal. Its lithe body was covered with downy blue fur. Pink eyes, set wide apart on an ivory face, smiled bemusedly, causing the hairless brow to crinkle.

Click here to continue on page 63

Artist For Hire
By Randy Gallegos

Freelance fantasy artist. Also known by some as, "When are you getting a real job?" or "So you just draw pictures all day?" The life of a freelance artist, particularly in the field of fantasy illustration, can be a strange and challenging one. For those of us lucky enough to do this full-time, the challenges of working at home meet with the challenges of a niche market to present a difficult career path.

Coffee is a constant, and the most necessary, art supply in any studio. A controlled environment, where interruptions are few and the noise level (if any) is dictated by the artist (usually consisting of music, soundtracks, and the like), together with an ability to go long stretches without speaking to another human being, is required. Living outside the most expensive housing markets can be a real advantage. I've yet to learn that one.

Being able to anticipate, with complete accuracy, how long a project will take to complete is a necessity. This is harder than it sounds. Every painting is different (or should be). This means that while one gains some experience with the time needed to tackle certain problems, it is still difficult to gauge each project, as the next painting will invariably have some aspects that have never been attempted before. More formulaic artists might have less of an issue with this, and it creates a quickly understandable desire to become formulaic. Then there is the matter of figuring out how fast you can accomplish something while maintaining the desired quality, and whether that converts a flat-fee commission into an acceptable hourly rate. Many artists, after years of freelancing, run to a steady day job for the simple security of knowing what—and that—you're getting paid at regular intervals.

Many artists, after years of freelancing, run to a steady day job for the sim–ple security of knowing what—and that—you're getting paid at regular inter–vals.

Most of the industry, which includes role-playing games and collectible card games, video games, and book and magazine publishing, is in fact comprised of tiny publishers, often hobbyists who decided to publish something on their own. This means that the majority of work created may never get seen by more than a small group of enthusiasts and will probably pay very little, if at all. The industry is rife with small publishers whose operations fold before paying contractors like artists, or who don't fold, but still don't pay. Certainly beyond these are the more lucrative and competitive fields of book publishing, fine art fantasy, and the film and video game industries.

The differences between the two ends of the industry are staggering:

A 1/4-page black and white piece for an average, non-high-profile role-playing game sourcebook can pay as little as $25. Let me repeat - $25. This means that if it takes you 2 hours to do research for a piece (if needed), photograph models (if needed), prep materials, send sketch for approval (and get it approved first time with no changes), and render the final piece with the balance of the time, you are paid $12.50 an hour. Now granted, that's above minimum wage, and depending on where you live, that's a decent 2 hours of work. However, note the variables. What if

the first sketch doesn't fly? What if the final doesn't fly as-is? A 1/4-page job can easily end up taking 4-5 hours, again depending on subject matter - a simple headshot portrait helps greatly in this 1/4-page economy. A battle scene does not. It doesn't take much for that $25 1/4 page job to end up at minimum wage - or less. Did I mention that self-employed artists (who actually run their studio as a business for tax purposes) get taxed above a salaried employee? An artist often prays that the original artwork itself sells sometime down the road (for, say, another $25) to make it worthwhile, or to simply lessen the loss.

On the other hand, a large book publisher like Avon Books pays $1-5000 for a cover painting, depending on things like timeframe, front cover only or wrap-around, complexity, and experience of the artist. A painting does take longer to do than a 1/4 page black-and-white, but there are a few more factors; the odds are the piece will actually be seen by the public at large, the original can sell for more, and the preparatory studies needed for a major painting can sell as well. Only a small percentage of the working artists can make it to this level, but it's easy to see why many want to get there.

So what motivates someone to enter this field? Usually it's a never-say-die spirit that, despite enormous challenges, wants more than anything to share with the larger world an interior one. You see, fantasy artists are forever dreamers. And as with the most amazing dream anyone has, we always wish other people could have witnessed it too. The advantage we have is the ability to actually transcribe these nebulous visions in the media of our choice. And since people are continually taken by scenes of unreality—the appearance in the real world (even if on canvas) of things previously unseen—well, that means that there's always an opportunity for fantasy artists to make a go at a career of being professional dream-birthers.

Hickem Tod from *The Wishing Lantern* by Jeff Wheeler. Painting by Randy Gallegos

eclosion- 10x30" acrylic/oil on watercolor board

The Artwork of Randy Gallegos

Titles: Eclosion (above); Anna (bottom left); Gollum (bottom right)

anna- 9x12" acrylic/oil on watercolor board

gollum- 11x17" acrylic/oil on illustration board

continued from Issue 4

Procyx
Chronicle of the End Star of Grief
Book One: Days of Destruction
by O.R. Savage

CHAPTER SEVEN
The Golden Death

Darkness met them at the gaping opening to RoseStar mixed with smudges of dim reflection. Palmer sensed Gaultor arrive behind him.

"Can't see any beacons, Colonel," Cosgrove said and glanced all around. "Not a one. Can't figure why they'd be out."

"I'm going to try seeing without enhancement," Palmer said, tranzing his visor into the 'up' position. "No portastrobes. I don't want to call attention to us. Without the beacons, Gaultor's the only one who can take us to Fed Comm's supply depot. He doesn't have a transpectral helmet to help him. One of us should be night adapted, too."

"Got it," Cosgrove answered.

"Turning off the lights." Palmer tranzed the tubeway portastrobes off behind them.

The darkness closed in on them, all but overwhelming. As the minutes passed, Palmer's eyes grew accustomed to the blend of Mhyrn's golden moonlight mingled with the blue, coherent brilliance of Procyx. The resulting turquoise blend filtered unevenly through the partially clouded dome of the city, revealing among triple shadows of gold, blue and black, a panorama of decadent opulence.

NEW click on map to view larger image

For far longer than they should have, the group stood transfixed, gazing at the towering remains of the abandoned seat of former Federation power. Palmer thought back on all that he had studied about RoseStar from library records on Ahrgol. The City had reined in thinly-veiled feudalism, maintaining a financial chokehold over the entire planet, virtually unchallenged. The gross absurdity of this infamous city's corruption smothered like some filthy mist.

"I had no idea," Lenore said quietly, and there was shame in her voice.

RoseStar redefined arrogance. Its towers groped in impossible convolutions.

While sophisticated in design and form, they flaunted vanity to the point of obscenity – suggestive, carnal. Towers swept skyward beyond gaudiness in their ornamentation. Many were covered in gold, silver or other rare materials. All were encrusted with the treasures of a billion worlds imported at incredible costs—yet mere trifles, apparently, to the builders. Even the walkways were sheathed in jewels.

Palmer labored beneath a distinct oppression. These buildings had witnessed unutterable evils, expressions of greed and selfishness taken to their extremes. When he evaluated the sheer cost of the materials that had been used in these buildings, he marveled that looters had not already stripped them clean. But then, as he pondered further, he began to understand why they had not.

The Mhyrnians must have had such disdain and revulsion for RoseStar, even today, that all the taboos they had placed upon it remained inviolate among even the worst criminals among them. This, more than anything Palmer could imagine, testified of the intensity of Mhyrnian hatred for the Federation.

"Where are we?" Palmer turned to Gaultor. The Mhyrnian was silent, his face in shadow. "Do you recognize this place?"

"I do. We need to traverse around the outside of the city for a distance, then inward by one of the main thoroughfares. It will take us a little time."

"Lead the way."

"Colonel," Cosgrove tranzed. "I'm sorry. I'm just kind of worried about Gaultor again. I wonder if we can really trust him. I know he saved your life back on the ship, but all of this—this city. It couldn't help but make him angry again. Do you think he might get angry enough to . . . I mean, perhaps he might even turn on us?" Cosgrove's tranz became suddenly subdued, even filled with shame. "I don't think I'd blame him."

Palmer thought for a moment, then tranzed a reply. "I think Gaultor is beyond that." Then, "He's quite a remarkable man."

"Maybe you're right," Cosgrove's tranz held a hint of futility. "Just the same, I'll be watching him carefully."

The group moved about the perimeter of the city. Here they found luxuriated lush parkways, gardens, and pools punctuated by what appeared to be exotic statuary, whose shapes Palmer had difficulty resolving. As he studied them intently, their base forms seemed to emerge. While exquisite in their execution, they proved revolting in their portrayals, for they expressed of all kinds of evils and perversions.

Palmer grew suddenly chill in the warm night. Among the statuary and buildings were recurrent images of ebony dragons intertwining themselves in twisting convolutions. The motifs were subtle, but dark dragons were everywhere.

"What do the dragons mean?" Palmer whispered to Gaultor after a moment. "Do you know?"

"Dragons?" the reply was incredulous. "What dragons? I see only abstract sculptures. You see dragons?"

"Everywhere." Palmer felt a hideous darkness crushing in about him. It was not a visual darkness, but an emotional one—a paralyzing depression that threatened to overwhelm him.

"Do they have a color—these dragons you see?"

"Black. You don't see them?"

"No."

"But . . . "

Click here to continue on page 70

Continued from Issue 4

Landmoor
by Jeff Wheeler

XXV

Dujahn of the Gray Legion took a quick gulp from his cup of lukewarm ale. He set it down and rubbed his bloodshot eyes, listening to Hallstoy tear into him again. It was the middle of another sweltering night, and he'd only gotten a few hours of sleep the previous evening.

"You tell that banned woman I want her out of my camp!" Hallstoy bellowed. "Sorian or not, she's caused enough problems. Tsyrke will be here in another day or two, and another Sorian with him! If that bleeding harlot is still here by then, she'll rue it for sure. Do I make myself clear, Dujahn?"

Dujahn looked up at the Bandit colonel. "If you're too afraid to say it, I can tell her whatever you wish, Hallstoy. But she will leave when she is ready. Not before."

"The men were just fine until she came. Now every other man has the gut-sickness and a bout of tide fever is hitting us!"

"You're camped in the middle of a swamp!" Dujahn said, exasperated. "Of course there is going to be tide fever!"

"We were here before she arrived," Hallstoy said. "And we have all the tobac and juttleberry to handle a campaign. But now half the army is sick and in need of a healer. The whole banned Zerite cult couldn't cure all of us! You're a blind half-wit if you don't believe she's done this. I want her out of my camp."

"Tell her yourself," Dujahn challenged.

They glared at each other. Dujahn watched fear and anger battle across the colonel's face. He didn't care. If he never set foot in the Shadows Wood again, he'd consider his life blessed. His voice was low so that the other duty officers wouldn't hear. "You're afraid of her, colonel. That's healthy. There are worse things than gut-sickness."

Hallstoy's expression went flat. "Get out of my tent."

"Gladly," Dujahn replied. He pushed away from the table and started for the opening of the tent door when shouts of alarm rose up in the camp.

"Sweet hate, what now?" Hallstoy said.

Dujahn opened the flap and was nearly knocked over by a Kiran Thall barging in. "Colonel! We're under attack!"

Dujahn blinked with surprise. "What did you say?"

A horn blurted in the darkness, several long heavy

BOOK PROPOSAL: Landmoor

We are considering publishing Landmoor in paperback. We have set up a portion of our website to discuss this possibility with those readers who might be interested. There you will get a chance to add your input and your voice on the idea and subscribe to a separate mailing list for news on Landmoor's publication. Click here to go to that page.

blats that caused a collective groan from the mass of writhing men. Yells and shrieks from the camp spurted up all around.

"The pickets were breached," the Kiran Thall gasped. "A dozen dead already. Some say the knights of Owen Draw – others claim they've seen the Shae. Half of the dead are from arrow wounds, Colonel. They're moving through the camp too quickly. Must be Crimson Wolfsmen – it's the only thing that makes sense!"

Dujahn staggered outside, watching the mass of teeming soldiers coming awake in the middle of a midnight raid. His heart slammed against his ribs, catching fire with the smell of smoke and fear in the air. The soldiers were panicking. If Hallstoy didn't quell it, they'd start attacking each other before long.

"Colonel!" Dujahn warned, turning back into the tent. "It's a small force. Less than a dozen, no doubt. Maybe Wolfsmen, maybe they want us to think that. They're going to hit the south pickets. Send your forces there – quickly!"

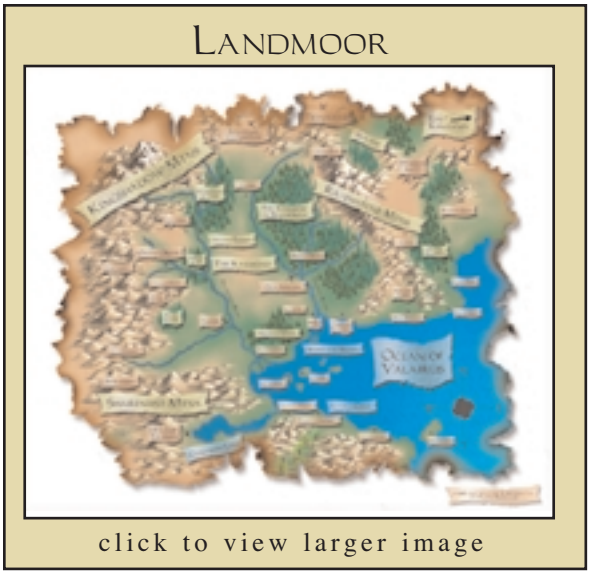
"How do you know?" Hallstoy challenged.

"This is my profession, you fool," Dujahn snapped, rushing from the tent to warn Miestri.

* * *

Thealos had never felt so afraid in his life. Forbidden magic. Everywhere. The smell of it was thick and putrid in his nose, overwhelming in its intensity. The stain of it was throughout the Bandit camp, laced in the mud and cinders and groaning coughs of the sick. He felt its effects leeching the life out of the camp. As they had entered the army, the men were stronger. But near the center of the Shoreland regiment, the presence of true Firekin was thicker than the mud clinging at his boots.

He was amazed that no one had challenged them yet. Maybe it was the stinging smoke from hundreds of campfires. Maybe it was sleep and ale. Getting past the Kiran Thall at the perimeter was almost too easy. Jaerod had taken Allavin along with him, and both had returned moments later, beckoning them on in silence. Thealos had never felt so much tension in his life. At any moment, someone would call out in warning and the chase would be on. Waiting for that moment was agonizing. Thus far, Jaerod's plan had been flawless. They walked quietly through the camp, stepping around the sleeping soldiers and steering wide of the command pavilions in the center. Jaerod had been through the camp himself and picked out the path he had chosen earlier.



"Who in blazes…?" a voice rang out before an arrow whistled and dropped the man with a grunt. Allavin had another arrow ready instantly.

"Over there! Do you see them? Intruders!"

"Run!" Jaerod ordered, and the chase began. Arrows lanced out at the soldiers who had spotted them, but the alarm had been raised at last. As a group, they started a quick jog together. The Sleepwalker's advice burned in his memory. Create chaos and confusion in the darkness. The Bandits would start fighting themselves. Thealos turned and shot and arrow into a smoldering firepit as he had with Tannon's band. A shower of sparks erupted, causing curses and shrieks from the soldiers

Click here to continue on page 95

Continued from page 18

Replies from other fantasy & sci-fi writers to the question "What is your carrot?"

I have a day job so I can *be* a writer. Even my pro-paying submissions haven't landed me more than $30 US at any one time. I'm lucky that I have income from writerly related pursuits that don't necessarily include actually selling my short stories, but I sure can't live on them, not even if I multiplied them by 10.

I think it's safe to assume 99% of us who end up with published novels will have some sort of 'day job' to fill in the monetary cracks.

Which is good enough for me. I can't imagine doing *anything* for 'the money', writing included. The amount of money I could possibly make writing isn't even factored into the equation:

1) Does writing make me happy?
2) Yes.

Good enough. And if sitting here in this office doing monkey data entry facilitates my ability to write, I'll always be happy.

Which is kinda more important in my simple little world than being famous, or rich, or adored, or imitated, or mocked.

Especially mocked, but even that is fun sometimes.

* * *

Hmmm, Started writing when I was 10. Wanted to write a big space opera like Star Wars, only darker and more complicated. Actually got my mom to get me a typewriter (I'd never used one before) and I sat down one day and realized I had absolutely no idea what to do, none! So I started reading like crazy - adult horror, Stephen King & VC Andrews (from my grandmothers collection of all places) and I dabbled here and there for years making stuff up.

Why? Because I have to. It's a blood disorder. I can't stop. It's compulsive behavior. I live for the printed word (as well as my drawings and music) because I have too. There's no way to explain it, but I love creating art the same way I love my wife and kids. I need it like a junkie needs heroin. I would loose my mind without it.

There is no why, I am a writer, I was born that way.

* * *

Why do I write? To get the stories out of my head. If I don't write the stories they plague my mind and I can't stop thinking about them. More than that though, I write so that others can see what my mind has come up with.

I'd love to get paid enough to spend my workday writing. But I know it isn't going to happen, so I keep my day job. As it is, I have enough time to write in the evenings to keep things going and enough money coming in to pay the bills.

At the same time, I think that I get a lot of my inspiration from the strange little things that happen at work. And I use my co-workers to research human interaction. So I'm not sure that I would really want to give up working entirely.

There you have my rather confused thoughts. Hope they help.

* * *

The fan mail's great. The money sucks.

My "carrot" is just in the joy of writing, but I would like to make money at it also.

I can tell you, I'm friends with two well-published writers, who are famous. One makes about $60k/year, the other around $35K. The first has been writing, and publishing, for about 30 years, the second for about 20. Both have told me that they couldn't quit their "day jobs" until they'd had about their 6th to 8th book published. Keep in mind, that is based on the economics of 20-30 years ago.

If someone's looking to make a living at this, I think they need to forget about writing short stories.

I don't know about the rest of you, but it takes me close to a week to put out a short that I'm proud of. Let's say it's a 7,000 word story, at $.03 per word, that's only $210, before taxes, equivalent to $5.25 per hour.

I sold 29 short stories, all for three or more cents per word, in 2000, grossing close to $4,400. Terrible.

Now, I've written three books, averaging 9 months on each. *If* I get a $5000 advance, and only earn my advance back (as most do) that comes to about $25 per hour. Big difference.

I write and do art because it's not just what I do, it's what I am. I'm a creator. I can't NOT create. I'd be writing and doing art even if no one ever saw it. I have to. It's my whole identity.

* * *

I'm a musician, mostly, and that takes about as much luck at getting good money as being a writer. So right now I work at a department store so I can pay rent while I wait to see if my two or three bands get any paying gigs.

But, as for my carrot, I had two major characters bouncing around in my head for literally years before I wrote them down, and once I started they'd keep me up at night until I could finish a scene or two.

Like someone else said, I do it because I need to create, especially with words or music. And I'm not doing it for the money, though it would be a nice thing to have happen. I'd just be happy having a whole paperback book with my name on it and in a store so I could show it off to my friends. That's all. And if I get a fan club, hey, I'd be down with that.

* * *

The reason I started writing is because I can't find much of the kind of fantasy that I like to read out there. In general, I don't like urban fantasy... don't like epic fantasy... don't like D&D books... which doesn't seem to leave a lot left to pick from. So, I write for my own entertainment. I really enjoy pulling out a story that I haven't looked at for a while and reading it without thinking of editing or improving. Sometimes I find myself grinning at comments my characters make that I'd forgotten about. To me, that makes it worth being a writer.

I find it unlikely that I'll ever make a profit as a writer. Sure, it'd be neat if I was wrong, but I'm not holding my breath.

* * *

What's my carrot?

Well, at the moment, I'm not writing very much — I just can't get the words in the right place, or something. I haven't written anything that I'd like the rest of the world to see since my first two offerings to the workshop about a month ago. But I'm still trying.

This is going to sound really pretentious, but I've got all these characters and ideas swirling around in my head — all their histories, all their relationships; I've got the world they live in and the technology and society evolving in my head. And it's driving me [expletive] nuts.

But I'm gonna keep going until I nail it, because if I don't, I don't think those guys in my head will forgive me for not giving them a chance.

* * *

Although I think teaching is the greatest job in the world, I make $33,000/ yr as a teacher, before taxes. I am only eligible for about a $500 raise every two years, if I stay in the district I'm in, which is why I moved here. Before that, it would take me 3 years to make a $500 raise. LA teachers do not get stipends. I have a $19,000 school loan to pay, and most banks will only lend me $50-60,000 for buying a house. In my area that is not enough for anything.

I look at publishing a novel as a way to supplement my income, honestly. I've been pretty realistic about it from the beginning, actually, which has probably helped me to make it this far. I do get some time off in the summers, but must also do professional development, which is unpaid, except the district will pay for the classes. A lot of teachers work second jobs in the summers, and on weekends. I choose to live on less, and put thoughts of owning a home aside for now, because that is when I am able to write.

Whoever said it is a compulsion is also right. The stories come into my head, and they must come out. I quite frequently dream in words, sentences, paragraphs, and plot details now. I started doing that as I became a better writer, about 5 years ago.

I've often theorized that there is some arrogance involved in wanting to be a published writer as well. The arrogance of believing people will have any interest in my inner thoughts. A bit of a god-complex really, especially for those of us in fantasy. The desire to create an entire world, whose very physics are under our control and subject to our whims, and then have other people read it and believe it, and even identify with it. That, to me, is the best part. To convince someone, for one moment, that they've left the world they know, fallen into mine, and are in for the ride of their life.

That's my carrot. And it's sweet.

* * *

You mean they'll **PAY** me to do this?

More seriously—I've spent 15 years trying to get an education, get a real job, convince myself I wanted to *anything* other than a spec fic writer groveling along in the underpaid literary gutter. I tried, oh Lord, I tried to give up sin and intransigence and become a middle manager.

It didn't work. I cannot be *made* to give a good (expletive expurgated) about any other career—so I have me a day job, and I write.

I don't mind my day job. I'd rather like to quit it someday and write full-time. I'm starting to have just enough success that it almost seems possibly perhaps within reach in five or ten years, maybe.

Until then—in the immortal words of Sarah McLaughlin, "You do what you have to do." And if I can never support myself by writing—well, I continue to have pretty good desktop publishing skills.

> But I'm gonna keep going until I nail it, because if I don't, I don't think
> those guys in my head will forgive me for not giving them a chance.

That's pretty much the same reason I keep writing.

* * *

Methinks we daydream about two things - our hopes, and our fears. The money thing seems to be neither in your case. Your heart is in your writing, your characters and "the glory of it."

Our need for money is a cultural thing. It's necessary to support whatever our cultures and our personal appetites dictate we "need." Sounds like the reason you traded writing short stories for novels. I notice you didn't trade writing for not writing. ;-)

As for my own feelings about writing - see above. Me too. :-D

* * *

What keeps me writing? I can't not write now that I've started. I have so many ideas and concepts in my head I have to get them out.

I fiddled around with writing in high school and college and then stopped. I spent 25 years keeping it all inside and living in the land of reality. Not the recommended way to keep your sanity. I'm much happier when I write.

I have no illusions about being able to support myself entirely by writing, at least not while I live in this area. But monetary rewards are not the only motivation. The act of creation is in and of itself a reward.

And the monetary gains are also relative. That $1250.00 you quoted is more than I clear in a month at my bookstore job. Luckily, my job is not the primary source of household income, but $1250.00 would still be nice for me to bring in.

A writer is what I am, it's what I have to be for the rest of my life.

Continued from page 10

clean up that blood before you touch anything else! It's hard enough getting anyone in here these days without you staining dresses!"

Elspeth nodded and went to do her sister-in-law's bidding, but that one word Tulaine had uttered rolled around in her head.

Disappear.

Tulaine hadn't meant it literally, of course. That wasn't possible.

Lots of things have happened lately that aren't supposed to be possible. What if this is possible too?

The sensible side of her scoffed at her nonsensical reaction, but it wasn't the sensible side that ruled in The Here. The possibility that visiting there might somehow cause her to truly disappear from reality nibbled at Elspeth the rest of the day. Not that she'd have minded leaving reality behind, really, if not for Peter and Annie. She'd have to ask Bertam and Ven about it all next time she saw them—they could lay her fears to rest.

The brocade got finished in time to be turned over to its owner, but Tulaine did as much tongue-lashing as she did stitching. By the time Elspeth dragged herself up the steep stairs at the back of the shop to the tiny room she shared with her daughter, she was all sore fingers and aching back and throbbing head. It was better, she supposed, to be too tired and aching to dwell on imagining what horrors Peter might be experiencing. Or on worrying that he was no longer experiencing anything.

When Elspeth came in, Annie was hunched over her sketch pad.

"Hello, baby," Elspeth said, with more cheeriness than she felt.

Annie didn't look up. There was a stub of charcoal clutched in her dainty hand. It wasn't touching the paper, but she stared intently at the pad before her anyhow, a faraway look in her faded blue eyes.

"Annie? I'm home, sweetie."

Still no reply.

Elspeth rubbed her aching hands over her sore eyes and stepped toward her daughter. "You've done a drawing, then? Can Momma see?"

Annie blinked and looked up, an expression of alarm growing on her round face. She hugged the pad up against her and frowned uncertainly. For one fleeting moment, Elspeth thought Annie might change her mind and show her the drawing. Then she hugged it closer yet.

"No, Momma," she said quietly.

Elspeth sighed, pushing aside the feelings of rejection and trying to understand. She thought it would break her heart less if Annie would shout or scream or cry, just once. She'd retreated into herself a little more every day, since Peter left. Elspeth had tried everything she could think of to regain lost ground, but her efforts had only succeeded in increasing her own sense of despondency and helplessness, while Annie continued to slip away.

"No," Annie repeated firmly, but still barely above a whisper. "No looking. I can't show you."

Elspeth sighed and smiled reassuringly. "All right, if you say. No looking. How about a spot of dinner, then I'll tuck you to bed?"

Annie came obediently, as always, but she tucked her sketch pad safely away first. Supper passed in its usual silence, and Elspeth thought again about what Tulaine had said.

Disappearing.

After she tucked Annie into bed, Elspeth sat at their one tiny window, leaned her head against the dust-coated pane, and prayed for rain. Its coming was as constant as the despair in the

city outside, and that had become her salvation.

The rain was her path into The Here.

The first time she'd gone had been an accident. She'd been sitting in this same spot, wondering and worrying and trying not to cry, and the rain had fallen in the stead of her tears. In an attempt to drag her mind away from the horrors it was imagining for her, she'd peered desperately into the rain, trying to find in it some sign that all would soon be well once more.

The sheet of gray had revealed no secrets, but as Elspeth had stared, she'd begun to see the individual drops of gray. The drops slanted down from the sky in a slowing motion that allowed her to see each one of them clearly. Clearly enough to realize that they weren't gray, exactly. A glint of blue here, a speck of green there, and yellow, and red. They'd glowed with a light that Elspeth couldn't figure the source of. It had shone through the drops, illuminating the colors, made them appear gray and seemed to come from somewhere beyond the raindrops. Or perhaps from between them.

Staring raptly, she'd tilted her head this way and that, then leaned forward and pressed her face against the glass as she'd tried to discover the secret of the phenomenon.

And suddenly, just like that, she'd been *in* the rain. And from there, she'd gone on to The Here, as Venuviel had indifferently titled it.

Elspeth still didn't know how it worked, but as the fat drops began to splatter the dusty street below, it didn't matter. All that mattered was that it *did* work.

She leaned forward, laid her forehead against the dirt-smeared glass, and willed herself into the rain. After pausing to wonder at the multitude of colors that swirled inside the gray, she stepped through them into The Here.

It took a moment to shake the disorientation that always came from entering. The Here, being what it was—whatever that was—was never the same. It was impossible to find her way by the usual means of streets or paths or landmarks. For the most part The Here seemed a shapeless, shimmering fog. Only when she found Ven and Bertam did the landscape take any form.

And she could always find Ven and Bertam, as though the thought of them was the key to a lock she couldn't see.

She pictured Ven now, with her shiny black hair bobbed short and her eyes like pieces of bright jet. For Bertam there was no image, since Elspeth never knew how he would look and had never, as far as she knew, seen his true form. But even so, there was a definable *something* that was him, a solidness, a steadiness that she could feel as clearly as she could see Ven's pixie-like face. It was like wrapping her mind around the ancient strength of an oak.

An apt comparison, since that was one of Bertam's preferred appearances. It was the one he currently commanded, it turned out.

"Ayup," he drawled as Elspeth stepped out of the gray. His branches bobbed affirmatively, and his leaves rustled with the richness of a summer afternoon. "And a damn fine one, Ven."

"A fine one what?" Elspeth asked.

Ven had her back to Elspeth, with her arms crossed and her head tilted to one side. Elspeth imagined that Ven was holding the tip of her tongue between her teeth—it was a habit that always reminded Elspeth of Annie.

Ven seemed to be studying something in the distance. Once Elspeth stepped up behind her and looked down the small rise they were standing on, she saw the object of Ven's perusal and laughed with delight.

"Oh yes, Ven! A very fine one," Elspeth said.

"Oh!" Ven's delicate hands fluttered in surprise as she turned. "Elspeth!" Her hands found their way back to each other. She wrung them nervously in front of her, blushing and lowering her eyes. "I didn't hear you coming."

Elspeth smiled at Ven with deep, genuine affection. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." She touched Ven's arm lightly, trying to get her to look up. "It truly is beautiful. All of them are, you know. Did you just now finish it?"

Bertam remained quiet, but his presence was as tangible as a touch.

Ven peeked up at Elspeth. "You really like it?"

Elspeth looked down the slope, to where a circle of silver-barked birch with branches linked were frozen in the middle of a dance. It was night there, in the canvas of magic that Ven had painted with her dreams, and the moon was fat and blue. Its light drifted across the sky in sparkles of silver, glinting off the iridescent pink and yellow and blue wings of moths.

Ven looked at Elspeth openly now, her dainty pink lips curved into a proud smile and her black eyes feverish with enthusiasm.

"Can you make it breathe?" Ven asked.

Bertam's leaves moved uneasily, making a noise that reminded Elspeth of rolling thunder and howling tornadic winds—though it was far, far fainter than the real sound. He was remembering, she suspected, how the magic Ven and she could make together had gone too far the first time they'd tried.

* * *

Having stumbled into The Here by accident, Elspeth had been unsure how to get out.

"Why leave at all?" Ven had asked, peering up at Elspeth from beneath lacy dark lashes. "You could just stay—stay with us."

"I can't," Elspeth replied reluctantly. "I don't belong here. I belong where I came from."

Ven frowned, a mix of disappointment and petulance. She seemed about to say more, but Bertam made a low sound in his throat and gently bumped his shaggy head against Ven's shoulder—bear had been his form of choice when Elspeth first met him. Ven lowered her gaze from Elspeth's and remained silent.

Bertam sat back and rubbed his muzzle with one massive paw. "Well," he rumbled, "Maybe you should just go back the way you came."

"I don't exactly know how I came," she confessed. "It was an accident. I was staring into the rain, and then I was in the rain, and then..."

"Rain?" Ven piped up, interest apparent in her soft voice. "Like a storm? Storms are one of my favorite things to paint!"

Elspeth hadn't heard her speak so many words in a row before then. Ven, caught looking directly at Elspeth, blushed as she cast her eyes back down and twisted her hands in front of her.

"Paint?" Elspeth hadn't seen any brushes or canvasses. But then, she hadn't seen a house or anything of that sort either. Until then, she'd merely assumed neither of the creatures she'd befriended lived in a house. "You do paintings, Ven? I'd like to see them, very much! Maybe... Maybe if I can figure my way out of here, I can figure my way back too, to visit, and you can show them to me?"

Or, if I can't figure my way out, I'll have plenty of time for looking.

"Really?" Forgetting her shyness, Ven looked up again. "Because I can do one for you now,

if you like."

Elspeth hesitated. Much as she needed to look for a way home, there was a beautiful light growing in Ven's dark eyes that she didn't want to snuff out with a refusal. And she was sincerely curious.

Apparently realizing the source of Elspeth's misgivings, Ven shook her head. "It won't take too long, not long at all. Here, look, I'll paint the rain!"

And with one grand, enthusiastic sweep of her hand, Ven did just that. Against the backdrop of sapphire sky and emerald forest, thousands of diamond-bright raindrops glittered in the sunlight. There was not a single cloud, no darkening of the sky, and the drops neither fell from nor to anyplace. They were simply *there*, frozen and perfect.

Elspeth gaped. "How did you do that?"

Ven grinned. It was as unexpected and as beautiful as the raindrop diamonds. "I can do more." Her quiet voice had given way to one that chimed with joy. "The clouds," Ven laughed. "Let me do the clouds." Her fingers pulled and plucked at the air before her, and great puffs of silvery-gray grew in the sapphire sky.

Entranced, Elspeth leaned forward, wondering what colors the raindrops might sparkle with if they fell and what dance the clouds might dance if they moved.

The rain fell. The clouds danced.

The brown bear that was Bertam grunted in surprise.

Ven first squealed, startled, then laughed and clapped her hands together. "Elspeth! Your magic — you've found your magic! Let's do more!"

Elspeth found herself laughing along with Ven and nodding at her suggestion.

"Lightning!" Ven called out, and made jagged slashes at the sky with her fingertips.

Bertam grumbled uneasily. "Ah..."

A streak of bright purple lightning painted itself from cloud to ground, followed by a larger bolt of ruby. Elspeth imagined them dancing together and they did, and more joined them as quickly as Ven could color them onto the sky.

"Ah, Ven..." rumbled Bertam.

"Thunder!" Ven laughed and made throwing motions with her hands. Golden sparkles scattered across the sky around the lightning, and as Elspeth heard the sound in her head it boomed across the treetops in reply, like the sound of a grand old bell tolling out a song of celebration.

"Elspeth..."

"Wind!" Ven cried out over the rolls of thunder and whirled in a mad dance. Great swirls of blue and green wove themselves into all else as Elspeth laughed and danced helplessly along with Ven, caught up in the same joyful magic.

"Ven."

Elspeth imagined it, and the wind howled and rushed gleefully. Ven danced as the wind whirled through the sky and the trees in the distance.

"Elspeth!"

The wind blew harder, then harder yet. The swirls coalesced into one funnel and then another. And another.

Horrified, Elspeth froze in mid-dance. Bertam clambered to all fours, making a low noise in his throat that she felt more than heard over the cacophony of thunder and wind. Ven danced on a moment longer, lost in the magic's euphoria, then caught sight of the tornadoes and stopped, staring.

The funnel clouds swayed, widened and thinned and widened again. Their paths were hard to determine, but a whining roar filled Elspeth's ears, drowning out all else and freezing her heart.

"Down!" Bertam roared and shoved Ven and Elspeth into the swale between the rise they stood on and the one next over. Elspeth hugged the ground and closed her eyes.

She felt bear fur, rich and warm and comforting, as Bertam covered them. And then the sound of the storm died away—not completely gone, but as though it were far away. Or muffled. Elspeth no longer felt Bertam's fur, and when she opened her eyes, she realized why.

They'd waited out the storm in the shelter of Bertam the cave, huddled together and protected by his stony embrace. It hadn't been a long wait—without their magic to fuel it, the storm had died out quickly. They repaired what damage they could and then, with a great deal more caution, used their magic to summon a light rain through which Elspeth had wished herself into the gray and home again.

* * *

"Please, Elspeth?" Ven asked. "Can you make it breathe?"

Bertam's leaves whispered again. Elspeth could almost hear words in the fitful rustling—*wind*, and *lightning*, and *hail*. She smiled and patted his trunk reassuringly.

"We'll be careful," she said, knowing he wouldn't completely believe her.

Elspeth reached for the scene Ven had painted. The magic breathed it into life and took them there, and Ven and Elspeth danced with the birches and the moths until the dewed grass stained their feet with its emerald kisses. Bertam stood quiet watch, commenting dryly now and again on the state of his companions' madness. But Elspeth was certain that, in whatever tree-ish way he could, he was grinning.

Later, they sat in Bertam's branches and ate plums that Ven painted and Elspeth flavored. Elspeth leaned forward to rest her chin on her knees, and the moonlight sifting through Bertam's leaves touched her hair and turned it into a spun silver veil at the edges of her vision. For one moment, she felt as beautiful as she had the first time Peter told her she was. She wondered if this was how a willow would feel, all draped in moonbeams.

"Bertam?" she asked.

His leaves whispered a lazy query.

"Can I change, too? Like you do?"

"Hmm." His leaves grew still as he thought. "I don't know."

"You could be anything," Ven piped in. "What do you want to be?"

Elspeth laughed, suddenly embarrassed. "I don't know. Nothing special, I guess."

They sat in comfortable silence a while longer before Elspeth remembered to pose the question that had worried her earlier that day.

"Have you ever worried about disappearing?" she asked.

She felt the magic falter. The tart flavor of the plum juice faded from her lips, and the pit on the ground beneath Bertam's branches disappeared from where she'd dropped it.

Elspeth looked at Ven. Her friend wouldn't look back at her, but Elspeth could see enough of Ven's pained expression to wish she hadn't asked.

Bertam said nothing, but his leaves were unnaturally still.

"I have to go now," Ven whispered and hopped from her perch. Somewhere between Bertam's branches and the ground, she simply winked out.

"Wait!" Elspeth stretched out her hand, then realized that Ven was already gone and pulled it back. "Ven?"

"She'll be all right. It's not something we talk about, if we can help it," Bertam said quietly. There was a pause before he added, "Some things we're not supposed to talk about."

"You're both real, aren't you? I mean, outside of The Here?" It was something Elspeth hadn't thought of before.

The branch she was sitting on shifted. "More or less," Bertam replied.

For now, the leaves rustled.

Elspeth felt cold.

"You're disappearing, aren't you?" she whispered to Bertam. "We all are."

The branch shifted again. Elspeth slid to the ground and turned to face the tree. "Aren't we? Can we stop it?"

"If we want to," Bertam said. "Elspeth..."

If he wanted to say more, he either didn't or couldn't. And he didn't explain what he meant, but Elspeth knew.

I have to choose.

* * *

She didn't go back to The Here the next night, or the night after. She was afraid to. She was afraid of how much she wanted to—and even more afraid of how seriously she considered simply going there and staying, even knowing that if she did she'd eventually disappear and leave behind her daughter and her husband.

She was sewing the last stitches of the taffeta when word came of Peter.

Annie was in the corner of the shop, sitting on the floor with her legs tucked under her to avoid Tulaine's impatient stamping. The sketch pad was propped on her knees, the charcoal moving in lazy strokes across it, but judging from the dreamy look in Annie's eyes, Elspeth doubted she was truly seeing the paper.

A boy entered the shop, wearing a uniform that was as much too big for him as he was too young to be wearing it. Thirteen? Twelve? With a shiver, Elspeth wondered how many that young had gone into battle.

And then she wondered why he was there.

He glanced around nervously, from the well-heeled patron to white-haired Tulaine and finally to Elspeth. He twisted something in his hands as his eyes met hers.

When Elspeth looked, she saw the sealed parchment he clutched, and the world closed in. She heard a whining drone that was not at all unlike the impending arrival of a tornado and froze in its path, unable to tear her eyes from that lonely scrap of paper.

The drone rose and fell in a cadence like speech—the boy saying her name. Elspeth thought she nodded. She couldn't recall moving her hands, but the letter was in them somehow. Her fingers broke the seal and unfolded the message.

She read it twice, and then a third time.

"He's alive," Tulaine said from behind her, in such a tone of astonishment that Elspeth wanted to cry but also to shake the woman.

Peter was alive, the note said. But fear gnawed in spite of Elspeth's relief. For if everything was well he wouldn't be at the infirmary, as the note also said.

The note fell from Elspeth's fingers. She bundled Annie, pad and charcoal and all, into her arms and went to find Peter.

* * *

"Catatonia," the physician informed her as she stared through a small pane of glass at the back of a man who looked like her husband. Peter's broad shoulders, Peter's sandy-brown hair; all the physical aspects seemed the same. Rows of beds and men with all manner of bandages were between them, with Peter at the end farthest. No bandages, nothing visibly wrong with him, but he sat on the edge of the bed and made no movement whatsoever.

"Shock of a sort," the physician continued. "Happens. Might snap out of it. Sooner or later." He shrugged and walked away.

Once Elspeth gathered her senses and her courage, she left Annie to her sketching in the hall outside and went into the room.

The sound of her footsteps clacked as loudly as the fear inside her.

He'll know the sound of my steps.

Peter didn't move.

She stopped behind him, wanting to say his name but afraid to.

He'd hear me. He'd recognize my voice and it would all be all right.

Elspeth said nothing. She stood behind him, clenching and unclenching her hands, and counted to ten once, then twice. Finally she walked around and stood in front of him.

It's a mistake. It's not really him. I'll look at his face and it will be...

Peter's familiar face was slack and expressionless.

Elspeth bit back a horrified cry, then forced herself to crouch down in front of him and look into his eyes.

The once-warm gray eyes were empty. Wherever Peter was, he wasn't there.

Blinking against her tears, Elspeth awkwardly took one of Peter's hands between hers and patted it with a mixture of reassurance and desperation.

"It'll be all right," she whispered, feeling stupid for saying such an obviously impossible thing. "I'll take care of you. Everything will be fine."

Lie. It's a lie. He's gone, and Annie's half-gone. And you've been so caught up in your own little fantasy world that you let them go.

And still she felt the temptation to run. Run to The Here and lose herself in the magic. Be as gone as Peter and Annie were.

What kind of woman are you, to even think such a thing?

Elspeth held Peter's limp hand against her cheek and cried quietly until the nurse came and led her away.

* * *

Elspeth was as much an automaton through supper that evening as Annie always was. She lingered after tucking Annie in, sat on the edge of the bed and ran her fingers through Annie's hair. Annie's curls were the same titanium shade as Elspeth's; they glowed in the moonlight slanting through the narrow window and reminded Elspeth of magic, and of how it felt to feel beautiful.

"It'll be all right," she whispered to Annie, as she had to Peter. "I'll take care of you."

Half-asleep, Annie murmured something in reply, but Elspeth could not quite make it out.

The rain came an hour later, as Elspeth rocked in the corner furthest from the window and tried to concentrate on the stitching she'd brought up from the shop. Fat drops knocked at the window. She swore they spoke her name.

"I can't," she said, trying not to cry. Crying was for the weak, and she had to be strong now. She should've been strong sooner.

Still the rain beckoned. *Just once more*, it insisted.

Elspeth watched the rivulets push across the glass.

"Just once?" she asked the raindrops. "To say goodbye?"

The rain danced and sang, but didn't answer. Elspeth laid aside her sewing and went to the window.

The raindrops slid across the night sky, more visible where they passed through the slants of dull lamplight: gray against gray against black.

That won't change, at least. There will always be gray.

She almost changed her mind. She wanted to see Ven and Bertam, but she thought her heart might break when she had to tell them goodbye.

"Once more," she whispered. She laid her forehead against the glass.

The gray fell, but Elspeth looked harder and found the colors hidden within it, then willed herself into their midst. She looked for Ven, felt for Bertam, and found them as she always seemed to find them—Ven painting, lost in rapt concentration in the scene she was creating, Bertam in a silent supportive watch nearby. His form of choice this day was bear.

Elspeth watched quietly for a moment, memorizing the feel of The Here, of Ven and Bertam's presence, so she could draw comfort from the memory later.

Ven's fingers worked the air before her, plucking colors from nowhere and weaving substance from nothing. As she painted a scene of butterflies floating above a magical lake, Bertam sat on his haunches a few paces behind her, flicking his ears lazily now and again or absently rubbing a paw across his muzzle. Neither seemed to notice Elspeth's arrival.

Just tell them. Get it over with.

Elspeth cleared her throat.

Bertam turned his shaggy head just enough to roll his eyes in her direction. "Well," he drawled. "Well."

Ven stopped in mid-stroke and spun around, leaving a tangerine-colored butterfly with long wing-tails half-finished. "Oh!" She grinned briefly before remembering herself and lowering her eyes. They stayed lowered for all of one second before Ven looked up again and smiled hopefully. "We can do this one together, too?"

Elspeth tried to force a smile in return. "Not this time," she said. "I just came to say goodbye."

They were both silent long enough to make Elspeth want to take back the words—to wish that she could.

"Thought you might," Bertam grumbled. His voice seemed harsher than usual, and unspoken words seemed to hang in the air around him. But if he wanted to say more, he didn't.

Ven wrung her hands. "I'll miss you," she blurted. She darted a pleading look at Bertam before lowering her gaze again. "But I understand," she added in a whisper.

Bertam shuffled around to face Elspeth and nodded again. "Ayup. Of course we understand."

Tears stung Elspeth's eyes. That was it? No tears? No pleas for her to stay? An emptiness opened inside and threatened to swallow her.

It's easier this way. Stop being a ninny and just go.

"Well," Elspeth said. "Goodbye, then."

The rain came of its own volition this time, and the gray fell all around them, streaked with the colors that made it. Elspeth looked at Bertam one last time.

And in his eyes she saw... Something. A light. A familiarity that made her breath catch. But before she could complete the connection, Ven was there, with her tiny arms wrapped tightly around Elspeth's waist and her face pressed against Elspeth's arm.

"I'll miss you, Momma." Ven's sob shivered up Elspeth's arm as confusion shivered through her mind. She realized suddenly that Ven's dark hair had become a cloud of silver-blonde. When she looked up at Elspeth, her face was less pixie and more child.

Annie gazed up at her through the color-laden rain.

Bertam shambled over and bumped his shaggy head against Annie's shoulder. "Ah, baby," he rumbled, his voice as gentle as...

Peter's. As gentle as Peter's. How had she never recognized his voice hidden in Bertam's rumbling tones?

He shifted, the first time Elspeth had seen him do it. Through the now-dense rain she watched the shape of the bear dissolve into a smaller figure, a human figure who knelt beside Annie. Paralyzed, Elspeth watched as Peter smoothed back Annie's hair.

"We promised, baby," he said. "We promised to let her see for herself."

Peter stood, took Elspeth's face into his hands, and pressed his lips against her forehead. She thought she might have stopped breathing.

"I couldn't help it," he whispered against her skin. "We couldn't help it. I'm sorry, Elspeth. We had to stay—I couldn't go back, not to... to that. We wanted you here, so Annie sent the rain for you, too. But it made us promise... It's about the price, I suppose. It's so much to pay. It wouldn't let us show you, it said you had to see for yourself. And I couldn't make it understand."

He put his arms around her and held her, tighter than he ever had. She felt him shaking, and he made a noise that was half-laugh, half-cry. "I knew you wouldn't abandon us," he said. "I wish I knew how to be as strong as you, that I could go back with you."

Elspeth couldn't find her voice. Part of her, deep inside, was furious. Hurt. She'd been willing to give this up for them. But they... They would just let her go.

Peter released her and looked down into her eyes. "Maybe there's still a chance," he whispered, although his eyes lacked true hope. "Maybe if you don't take no for an answer."

He stepped back, into the rain, until he was only a shadow. The rain poured down Elspeth's face, as cold as the shock that ran through her. Annie stepped back too, to stand beside Peter and cling to his hand. She was crying.

The rain fell harder around them. Between them. The colors of the raindrops bled back into the gray as Peter and Annie faded from sight.

Elspeth felt the city where she lived, where she *really* lived, pulling at her. The city where her husband stared at nothing and never moved. The city her daughter had abandoned for a canvas of dreams. Again she felt a pang of anger—but she also found that forgiving them was easier than blaming them.

"No," Elspeth whispered. "I want to stay here."

It was just once more, the rain whispered in reply. *They broke the promise.*

"But it wasn't fair." Elspeth's voice was barely audible. "If I'd known..."

You had to see for yourself. But she told you.

The gray continued to grow. Panic wrapped around Elspeth's throat. She could see her window now, through the rain, from the outside looking in. Her body was propped against it, her forehead pressed against the dirt-streaked pane. Her eyes stared blankly, the gaze of a dead woman, even though her breath still misted the glass. Beyond, she could see Annie's tiny form huddled on the bed, perfectly still save for the rise and fall of her chest.

She won't wake. She'll never wake. I'll be alone forever.

"No," she croaked. "Let me back in. Please!"

Elspeth reached for the colors she knew were inside the gray, reached until her mind screamed and her ears rang and her eyes surely bled.

You *had to see.*

But I did see, she realized suddenly. *I saw Peter—or was starting to. Just before Annie grabbed me. I saw.*

"I saw," she whispered into the gray. "I saw!"

There. One tiny speck of sapphire.

Like the wings of a moth.

Elspeth grabbed hold of it, and of the flash of emerald and the glint of sunshine yellow that came after it.

The silence was deafening after the pounding of the rain. Elspeth squeezed her eyes shut and looked for Ven. Felt for Bertam.

"Well..." a familiar voice drawled. Elspeth opened her eyes.

Two steps away, a great brown bear watched over a dark-haired pixie, who stared up at the stars she'd painted onto a velvet black sky. They leaned together, holding each other up.

You could be anything, Ven had told her. *What do you want to be?*

"I want to be here," Elspeth said. She took the two steps, reaching for the twinkle that she knew was in the stars.

And disappeared.

THE END

Leave a message about this story.

Continued from page 15

boots slipped twice, but she recovered and scampered down.

"There we are, Lady Maia!" One of the soldiers reached up and hoisted her down. Rain and waves drenched everyone. "There we go, sit over there. Help her, Verrick."

Maia felt another set of hands clamp against her shoulders and shove her down onto a hard bench. The dinghy took the wave crests even more sharply, and she grabbed at an oarlock. It steadied for a moment, giving her enough time to tighten her cloak about her throat and raise the hood to shield her head. The boat rocked as the last man entered it. The two soldiers gripping the rope ladder released it and snatched two dripping oars from another man.

"All right! Dip and row! The water's calmer over there. C'mon men, give it your backs. It's hard rowing but we'll get there. Watch for the rocks."

Maia listened to the captain's voice, barking quick and rough and naming each man. By the third round, she had them all memorized: Verrick, Hsop, Adler, and Kent. Rubbing her temples, she tried to quell the nausea that had plagued her since leaving Tiris-Dannon. She had puked enough times in front of the men on board that they might wonder if she were pregnant instead of merely seasick. As if any man would want her. Looking back, she saw the sturdy trading ship lumber through the choppy seas away from them. She shook her head sadly and scanned the waves for a sign of the sailor who had gone overboard. Seeing no mark of the man, she turned and looked at the shore they struggled to reach.

The captain wiped spume from his arm. His sand-colored hair was spiky and askew with the wind and waves. He muttered something under his breath and glared at her. "It's too far. By the Blood, it's too far!" The captain fished through his pockets for a wineskin. He gulped down a few swallows and wiped his mouth. His face was all seams and angles. "Keep rowing! Hard and long, it's a way to go. Steer for those rocks over there. The ones jutting up like fingers."

Maia hung her head and gripped the rim of the wood beneath her seat. She glanced over at the assassin and felt a shudder of disgust go through her. These were the men her father had sent to protect her. Five soldiers who were in the keep dungeon for drinking on duty and a Kishion. The choice of protectors spoke clearly. He did not believe she would survive the journey.

She lifted her head, exhausted by the ordeal at sea, and found it strange how choppy the seas were so near the land. The tide would bring them crashing into the rocks, so the soldiers began fighting more to control their course than before. Maia shielded her eyes and peered ahead at the rocky formations that rose from the sea in front of them. The formations were odd-shaped and frightening in their complexity. Short stunted ones, tall thin ones like wraith fingers – there were even rocks that had been hollowed out, allowing the tide to wash and swirl in the gaps. Strange, it was almost like an arch-window from a castle. Beyond the jagged rock towers, woodlands and mountains gripped the coast as far as she could see in both directions. The tall trees swayed with the storm.

"Steer to that archway! It looks wide enough for us! Careful with the oar, Hsop. Keep it steady!"

Captain Rawlt directed them near the supposed archway in the rocks. The soldiers craned their necks looking up the heights at the moss-encrusted stone. Maia looked also, but did not whistle in wonder. The Kystrel around her neck burned once more against her skin. She put her hand to her heart and shuddered as knowledge flooded her.

"What is it, Lady?" the assassin asked, seeing her wince.

She shook her head. "I'm tired. Just very tired. Are we almost to shore?"

His look told her that he did not believe her. It was his turn to look disgusted, and she knew

she deserved it. Unable to bear the scars twitching on his face, she looked away.

"Near enough," the Kishion said. "Hopefully we will find shelter soon. Before dark."

Maia nodded, listening to the whispers of the Kystrel. The mossy rock was more deceiving than it appeared. The shadow of the archway smothered the dinghy for a few seconds before sunlight spilled on them and revealed a bay with a calm sandy shore beyond. Maia looked back and up at the arch, seeing it for what it really was. The rock formations were the corpse of a fallen castle built two thousand years before. Images of it whispered in her mind. She longed to touch the rock and listen to its stories. But she dared not. Only the Dochte Mandar used the power of the Kystrel. And they allowed no woman to study their ways.

Captain Rawlt called for Adler and Kent to go ashore first. The two soldiers looked reluctant, but climbed over the edge into the waves. They both drew swords that had nicks from combat and curves where a whetstone had taken away the true edge. Each wore a sturdy mail hauberk, belted in the middle, and gray tunics fringed with green. She felt the waves ease the dinghy even closer to shore. The two soldiers roved the beach, investigating the shore, and then waved for the others to join them.

After the other soldiers had disembarked, Maia stepped off into the water followed by the assassin. The water was much warmer here than it had been out at sea. Her dress was sodden, but the cloak was drying out quickly. Lowering her hood, she felt the sun beat down on her head. She took a look at some of her long brown hair, clumped and wet, and felt she would never be clean again. But clean did not really matter to her any more. She was going to her death. How many more breaths did she have left? How many more sunsets would she see? She struggled with her thoughts. Despair rose up like a wall before her, but she gritted her teeth and tried to ignore its looming shapes.

"Over here, Cap'n! Another dinghy!"

Verrick and Hsop were obviously good companions. They dragged the *Blessing's* dinghy up near the trees and lashed it to a tall plumed tree. The captain and the assassin went to explore a battered dinghy left near the rocks to one side of the grotto. The other two soldiers – she thought a moment for their names before remembering them, Adler and Kent – had started off into the trees, probably looking for a place to set camp.

Maia clamped her hand over the Kystrel, feeling its warmth and shape beneath the bodice. The medallion was small, enough so to cup in her hand yet still feel the bite of its edges.

A whisper ran through her. *You will all die in this place. This is the place where death was born*.

* * *

Maia tried to writhe free of a nightmare. It felt like drowning except she knew she was on land. She fought against the smothering sleep, trying to claw herself awake again. The Kystrel flared to life, responding to the fear in her throat. Pinpricks of pain in her hands and on her face became real and she opened her eyes. Spiders covered her cloak. They were everywhere. A soldier had one feasting on his chin near his open mouth. They were huge spiders, with bulging sacks, nearly the size of a minted coin. Her hands were red and oozing with bites and she felt welts on her face too. She wanted to scream, but the coldness inside her chest made her pant and gasp. The soldiers were all asleep – or were they dead?

Maia grasped her hand to her heart, feeling the Kystrel grow hot enough to blister. She unleashed the magic like a silent wind and the spiders began fleeing.

One of the soldiers awoke with a twitch of pain and let out a frantic howl. "By the Blood!" His scream was more like a groan and he nearly left his skin in his haste to get up and start stamping at the fleeing spiders.

"What's the fuss about now?" Rawlt snarled before spluttering in shock. "Good Gods! Look at 'em! Shake 'em off! Shake 'em off!"

The assassin grabbed Maia from behind and yanked her to her feet, brushing her cloak from her shoulders to her ankles. The magic burned fiercely inside her and she tried to control it, to douse it, but it was a thing all its own now, screaming at the spiders to be away.

One of the soldiers crushed a big one with his heel and hundreds of tiny spiders spilled from the broken sacks, like an anthill kicked over. Maia covered her mouth and cringed, but the little ones fled from her as well, vanishing into the darkness of the woodlands.

Huffing and cursing, the soldiers stamped and struck, clearing the ground and kicking up sand. She looked at bite-marks on their hands and faces, save those who had worn gloves to sleep. Hunching over, she began coughing, trying to conceal the glow of the magic shining through her bodice. The Kystrel scalded her skin, but there was nothing she could do.

Shoving away from the assassin, she plunged into the woodlands. She ran face-first into a large silky web and wiped the tickling, clinging strands from her face and hair. The magic roared through her body, making her giddy and fresh. Laughter threatened to spill out her mouth, but she smothered it and plunged deeper into the darkness. Screams and tears they would understand, but not laughter. Wetness and mud met her feet as she splashed in a thin stream. After stopping, she hunched over and breathed in quick gulps. The damp clothes felt rough against her skin.

Looking up, she saw it. Glowing eyes in the dark.

Panic struck her. The eyes were red and tinged with flame. She trembled, scared beyond words. The eyes did not blink. They only watched her from the darkness. She clutched at the Kystrel, ready to fight off an attacker with its magic. Coldness, everywhere, despite the humidity. She found herself looking slightly down at them. Unblinking, they had not moved.

"What are you?" she whispered in the darkness.

Nothing.

Fear slowly ebbed out of her. As the Kystrel cooled, she saw the eyes begin to flicker and grow dim. The trickling sound of water stopped. She breathed slowly, waiting. Nothing happened. Finally, the magic guttered out of her at last, congealing inside her bones and skin. It's aftermath made her feel sleepy and sick. The eyes were gone also, vanished in the dark.

"Lady?"

It was the assassin.

"I'm…I'm over here."

She thought it strange that the stream had vanished too. Water sloshed around her boots but the earth swallowed it. The Kishion approached her from behind. She cocked her head, grateful that she couldn't see his face in the dark. "Are my eyes still glowing?"

"They are. But it is fading quickly."

"Did any of them…notice?"

"I don't think so. Come back to the camp. I think they've crushed all the spiders by now. Wretched little things. They were only sack-spiders, Lady. The bite isn't deadly to anyone."

She turned to him. "But do they swarm like that? So many?"

The assassin was quiet. "I've never seen it happen, Lady."

Maia shivered. She looked back to where she had seen the glowing eyes, but there was only

darkness.

* * *

Morning penetrated the blight-birches and towering redwoods. Winds from the ocean could not pierce the dense foliage, making the air damp and heavy. The soldiers were restless and angry the next morning. Maia felt sick to her stomach and fatigued. Using the Kystrel always left her so.

"Up, Lady. This isn't your father's castle. No lying abed for hours. It's a stiff march and we'd best start early before the heat settles in." Rawlt stood over her. The others were awake, looking like victims of the pox. She did not wish for a mirror. She was too afraid of what she'd see in its reflection.

The assassin grabbed her elbow to help her stand. She scowled at him and jerked her arm away.

While they ate day-old bread from the provision sacks, she sat on a rock and nibbled at a heel and some crumbling cheese. She wasn't hungry, but that was also the effect of the Kystrel. It burned everything out of her. Silently, she thanked her good fortune that none of the common soldiers had seen her use it.

"Need a drink, Lady?" The captain offered his wineskin, which he had just finished sharing with another man.

Her stomach roiled and she shook her head no. "I'll get some water. There's a stream nearby."

Rising from the broken branch, Maia gathered her dirty skirts and walked back to the place where she had fled to the night before. The sun blanketed the overgrown area in hazy sheets, but most things were dappled in shadows. Fallen trees and debris made the footing treacherous. Rocks thick with moss choked the way and she wondered how she had kept from stumbling in the dark. Listening, she did not hear any sound except the buzzing of insects and the sighing of the branches. A massive egg-shaped boulder rose in front of her from behind the thick brush. She stopped.

There was a face carved on the rock.

Maia approached it curiously, wondering if this was what she had seen. The boulder was taller than her, but not as tall as the assassin. Its front was furrowed with growth and vines, but something had been carved mid-way up its surface. A face but not of any creature she knew. So old and ravaged was its surface that it hinted more than revealed. Patterns and designs of some ancient custom. It defied her knowledge. Perhaps she had seen its eyes glowing in the dark.

She stepped near it and saw where water had eroded away the soil at its base. The ground was still damp. What did it mean? What was its purpose? Whispers came in her mind and she paused to listen. They had started coming to her days after she had first put on the Kystrel. The whispers of knowledge were part of its magic. She understood. The boulder was a waymarker – a totem of magic that led to Basilides, the lost city. There were other waymarkers along the route. Gingerly, she reached out and touched the boulder. Its surface was rough and cold. The Kystrel burned inside her bodice again and she tried to stop it, but could not resist the forceful surge of magic. The strange eyes on the boulder glowed, starting along its contorted visage and spreading across its seams. It glowed like molten ore, as if its pressure would cause the boulder to shatter.

Water rushed from a small opening on the face of the rock. It fell to the base, gathering and pooling. Maia was dazed, feeling the strength of the magic respond to her touch and to the Kystrel. It was beginning to make sense. The magic of the Dochte Mandar was truly an inheritance from the past. From the lost city. The order had been controlling who learned it for centuries, but its begin-

nings went further. The water flowed gently, cleanly, churning up a small stream in moments. She dipped her hand and drank from it. Clean and wonderful.

Kneeling by the stream, she cupped her hand and drank again. It was only water, not some potion or elixir. She quickly scrubbed the dirt from her arms and face, feeling the wetness sting the spider scabs.

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

The assassin's voice had a barb of anger in it.

Maia looked up and glared at him. She wiped her mouth on the back of her hand, wondering why she had ever relished the feeling of being clean. Such a petty thing, really. The small stream began soaking the skirt at her knees and so she stood.

He was a rough man. All the Kishion were. In the dark, it was almost easy to forget what he looked like during the day. His face was a patchwork of scars, as if some great cat had raked him from eye to lip. Part of one ear was missing. His eyes were full of hate, full of wrath. Eyes as blue as the water churning at her feet. His cowl was up, but she could see the coarse brown hair that fell across his forehead. Always in somber grays and browns, he blended with the woodlands as if we were made of nothing but anger and bark.

"I was thirsty." Her throat was suddenly dry again.

"You were thirsty." He stepped closer. "If one of them had seen you, woman, what then?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "An ancient magic is in this place. It speaks to me. It's spoken to me since we came ashore."

"Quit listening to it," he suggested. "You'll get us both killed."

She chewed her lip and felt her own anger rise up. "My magic may be the only thing that saves us, Kishion." She loaded the term with as much loathing and contempt as she could muster.

His face curved into some sort of sardonic smile. The scar on his lip twitched. "I don't doubt it," he whispered.

Maia licked her lips and gestured to the stone. "These are waymarkers. There are more along the way. I had not expected a trail to follow to Basilides, but I think there is one. I don't know how far it goes or what else we may find."

"More spiders perhaps?"

She winced. "I pray not. Bring the others this way. We can go through the woods. I know where the next one is…at least I know the direction to start looking."

The Kishion nodded. "You missed a spot of mud, Lady. Or is that a bruise?" He motioned his gloved hand to her bosom. She looked down and saw that her bodice was sagging low. It did not reveal the Kystrel but the shadowed flesh did indeed look like a bruise.

"I struck the rail yesterday," she lied.

A short cough of a chuckle. "I'm sure you did, Lady." The expression on his face told her that he knew she was lying – again. The Kishion turned and padded silently into the woods, and then whistled sharply for the soldiers.

Maia turned her back to him, quickly slipping loose the bodice buttons. She saw the small bronze medallion of the Kystrel dangling from a strong chain. The shadowstain on her chest was spreading, crawling beneath her skin. It was like a tattoo of black lines and sigils, a whorl of leaves and vines and seaweed. And it mushroomed every time she used the magic, adding new rings of the pattern to her skin. Maia closed her eyes and fought the tears that stung them suddenly. She knew of Dochte Mandar with painted faces and shoulders. It was the mark of the magic on its user.

She wondered how much longer she would be able to keep hers a secret.

* * *

"Ow! Too hot, that one! Is it squirming loose yet? How many times have you poked it?"

Maia heard the voice through the trees. The soldiers clustered together, each man stripped to the waist and checking each other for ticks. She sat like stone with her arms clamped around her knees while the Kishion searched the skin on her back for more. She covered her front with her cloak and shivered. She had already found two that morning – one on the inside of her thigh and the other on her arm, just below her elbow.

Festering scabs covered them all. There were so many ticks in the woods that it took an hour just to prick them loose with a hot needle each morning. They were three days into the woods of the land south of the Neck. Three waymarkers had been discovered so far, each one near the end of the day. Their water reserves were low, but there were streams throughout the lands, slashing through the broken redwoods and brambles.

"Hold still, there are two more," the Kishion said, pinching the skin on her lower back. "Let me tease them out. If the needle's still warm enough."

Maia ducked her head and brushed the hair away from her neck. She could feel the Kishion's breath on her back and felt her stomach clench with humiliation. He clucked his tongue and swore and she felt a stab of pain at her back.

"Almost done," he muttered. "There's one. Now let's get the brother. There we are. Hold still."

Pain stung her again, making her eyes water. She bit her lip. He pinched the spot to make it bleed a little. All she needed to do was a little dab of the magic and…

"How much further in these cursed woods?" Captain Rawlt said in a bellowing voice, storming over to where they sat. Maia felt even more mortified as she struggled to raise the gown while keeping herself covered. The Kishion snorted and plucked the last tick away. He helped tug the dress up around her shoulders.

Rawlt had a fresh scab on his cheek. "We've been here for three days, Lady. If it takes much longer, we won't have time to cross back and reach the other side of the Neck. It takes a ship twelve to fourteen days to maneuver the Withrin Maze. If we don't find the ruins in three days, we must turn back."

"A moment so I can finish dressing, captain!" she said angrily.

"Oh for the Blood, woman! I've seen enough …"

"You've not seen the king's daughter! Now turn around, please!"

Rawlt swore in frustration, but he obeyed her and turned on his heel. Maia felt vindicated and hurried to button up the bodice to hide the Kystrel and its stain. The Kishion helped her to her feet – so strange that an assassin showed more respect than a captain – and then crushed something under his boot.

"I was saying, Lady, that we are fast running out of time," Rawlt said over his shoulder. "The ship won't linger for us for very long. If we do not cross the Neck and meet it on time, it may well leave us behind. These are not your father's lands, Lady. I can quip well enough with the Nestors, but someone from Moritain would know us by our speech."

"I know how many days we've lost, captain. But I do not know how many more waymarkers are leading the way. If they are numbered at all, it has worn off over hundreds of years. If I…"

Captain Rawlt drew his sword and swung it down, cutting a snake in half. "By the Blood,

this land will be the death of us." His arm trembled as he stared at the writhing serpent near his boot. It had slithered up so quickly that Maia had not seen it until after.

He swung around, facing her again, his eyes livid. "Two more days, Lady. I'll give you two more days. Then we're leaving you and your stinking Kishion here to rot."

Maia felt nothing but outrage. "When my father hears of this…"

His face contorted with anger. "The Dochte Mandar take your father! He should never have expelled them from the realm. Two days, Lady. That's all I will promise you."

Maia clenched her hands. Could she force him to obey with the Kystrel? Should she? Anger churned alive inside her. Anger toward her father, for sending her here with such pitiful escorts. No one had been able to settle the land below the Neck. After three days of spiders, snakes, ticks, and heat she understood why. It was a dead land full of creatures hunting for prey. She could see why nobody wanted it. But she needed soldiers to offer some protection along the way. What other terrors awaited them, she could only guess.

You will all die in this place. This is the place where death was born.

Maia shuddered. She glanced at the scar-faced Kishion and gave him a nod of thanks. He looked amused by it and walked away without saying anything.

* * *

The fifth waymarker was in a grove full of bones.

"By the True Gods," Hsop whispered, his eyes widening. Maia watched him as he knelt near the encrusted shell of a breastplate that was caved in beneath the pressure of a spearhead. The tarnished helmet was askew and he struggled to open its rusted hinges. The skull was brittle and became dust at his touch.

Kent stalked the perimeter a bit and grabbed the hilt of a sword. It too was crusted and the blade had been snapped in the middle. "It's rusted," he said. "Flakes of it. I've never seen a battlefield like this before. How many do you think there were?"

Captain Rawlt kicked part of the wreckage and muttered something. "…and easily five hundred dead. See how they are mounded up near the waymarker? Probably even more dead over there. This place…by the Gods, you can still feel it." He had his sword out and ready, yet rubbed his arm as if chilled. "Almost like…you can hear them still screaming." He looked at Maia. "Study the waymarker, Lady. Hurry now. Find out where the next one is if you can."

Maia stared at the chasm made up of the dead. The past days she had pretended to decipher faint writing on the stones to give her an excuse to touch them. The whispers had always come, coaxing her in the direction they should go next. This time, she could hear voices in her mind before nearing the waymarker. A battle had happened here, hundreds and hundreds of years ago. No one had survived to bury the dead or claim the blades or armor. Not one man.

"Go on, Lady! We can't dwell here long. It's…it's not right being here."

Maia bit her lip and stepped into the field of carnage. The footing was treacherous. It took all her concentration to keep from stumbling. Verrick wandered the perimeter and returned with several weapons. The hilts had corroded but the blades had been trapped inside the scabbards and were still good.

"Look at these, captain," Verrick said. "Still got an edge to them. I've never seen this kind of forge pattern though. It's like ripples. Isn't that strange?"

Maia listened to his voice and she crossed the remaining steps to the waymarker. Like the

others, its face was worn nearly away. As she reached to touch it, something heavy in the woods made the trees shudder and drew their attention. Limbs snapped and crashed, and a heavy cough and snuffling sound boomed in the stillness. Maia froze, staring at the spot behind them.

"Captain! Over there!"

A blur of gray hide and claws smashed through the woods, bigger around than a redwood and taller than a two horses. Kent took a paw and sailed into a tree with a sickening sound. The thing let out a roar before snatching Kent's body with hooked claws and disappearing back into the woodlands.

"Verrick! Take that flank! Hsop! You go that way. I'll go in the middle. Adler? Where are you, man? Adler!" The soldier was nowhere to be seen. "Kishion! Get over there. You go around behind it if you can. I think it's a grey-rank. I want everyone…"

The instructions were useless. The thing bounded from the woods again without even a growl and came up on Rawlt like a charging bull. Maia screamed as the captain took a blow across his chest, flinging him halfway across the field of the dead. The Kishion was like a blur himself, two knives in his hands as he slipped up to the creature and stabbed beneath its hairy limbs. Hsop struck at its flank, hacking at it with his sword and spraying black blood in the air. A hurt bark came from the beast and it rounded on Hsop and trampled him. Maia thought she would faint at the sounds it made doing so. Rawlt struggled to his feet, his face full of blood and tried to find his fallen sword. Its stench filled the air.

"Kill it! Get it off Hsop!" Verrick shouted, stabbing at its other flank. The creature was wounded, but it was incredibly strong. It took the sword thrusts and barked, whipping its huge limbs around and staggering them. The thing grabbed Verrick and bit down on his side with huge yellow teeth. The Kishion struck at it again and again, spraying more blood in the air before he was struck by a whipping paw and tossed to the earth.

Maia knew the battle would only last for a few more seconds before they were all dead and it came for her. The Kystrel needed little more than that thought to act on its own. The magic surged up within her, bringing her to her feet. It struck the beast with a blast of fear and made the wind howl through the trees. Pops of thunder broke overhead as Maia unleashed the magic at it again. It could not resist her thoughts…her fear…as she focused it into the hulking monster. Four short barks came out of its gnarled snout and it fled back into the thick woodlands.

Water gushed from the waymarker's mouth.

Rawlt tried to make it to his feet, but his legs wobbled and he crashed down. Blood smeared across his face. Verrick's writhing stilled as his lifeblood drained away from his shattered hip. A booming bark erupted from the woodlands, far away but still close enough to send shivers through Maia. The Kishion was back on his feet, clutching a tear in his shirt and a wet slash on his chest.

Maia staggered away from the waymarker and tried to help, but stopped short when she saw the look on Rawlt's face.

"Your eyes are glowing, Lady. I swear by the True Gods, I see your eyes…they're like fire."

Adler slunk from the trees, holding his weapon and trembling with fear. His face had a gray-ish cast and his eyes were red.

Maia licked her lips. "You have a duty, captain. My father sent you to escort me here."

"Your father!" he spat. Rawlt coughed and nearly choked. "If your father knows what you are, what you've done, then may the True Gods smite us all. Only the Dochte Mandar can use the magic, Lady. No woman ever has been allowed. It is too strong a thing, to wild a thing to trust to the knowledge of a…woman." He coughed into his fist and brought up his sword. "I know …I must… I

should kill you."

Maia had expected his reaction. "I won't let you kill me, captain." With her hand on her bosom, she wrestled with the magic aching inside her. It wanted to rip through Rawlt's anger, slashing it like a wine bladder.

"Captain! Behind you!"

The Kishion struck like a snake, slipping around behind Rawlt and wrestling beneath the captain's sword arm and bringing the long-knife to his throat.

No! Maia sent a blast of the magic at the Kishion, stunning him and keeping the blade from shearing through the captain's neck. Rawlt sputtered an oath and shoved away from the assassin. With eyes full of hate, he charged Maia through the debris of the dead. The Kystrel surged, snapping her control of it like a frail tether and struck him. Wind shrieked and howled, whistling and keening through the trees. His expression filled with loathing and fear as the gale shoved him backwards. Bone dust and rust flakes blinded and stung him. Tarnished helmets rattled loose from the pile before smashing into him. He shielded his face and tried again to press through the winds. Thunder rumbled in the air. Maia saw the other soldier fleeing into the woods. Redwoods swayed with the gale and water gushed from the waymarker in a river.

"Go captain. Go!"

Rawlt choked on his words, backing away from her and tumbled into the heap of bones and smashed breastplates. Cuts and windburn dotted his face as he too fled from her. Maia let the magic burn through her, running its course while ravaging her senses. She climbed the small mound to the waymarker and touched its rough face, learning in an instant where the next one sat. Dead branches crashed through the wood as the windstorm eased. She turned and saw the Kishion in a heap, lying still. She hoped she had not hurt him too much with the Kystrel.

After stumbling through the debris, she knelt by him and watched the slow rise and fall of his breathing.

"Are you…?"

The Kishion struck before she could finish the thought. Pain ribboned in her ribs, and she saw his long-knife. His blue eyes met hers coldly.

"If you ever use the magic on me again, I'll kill you."

Maia's heart lurched when she realized he had not shoved the blade into her, but pricked with the tip. Fear seeped into her stomach and she started trembling. Glancing down, she saw blood blooming on her dress. It terrified her how close to death she was. A little more pressure on the haft of the long-knife – there was nothing to stop it from spilling her life away. It hurt.

"If you're going to kill me, Kishion, then do it now and get it over with." She met his stare and flinched at it.

He withdrew the long-knife and wiped her blood on his pants. "As if I needed your permission. Wait here for me, I'm going to kill the two fools you let run away."

Maia stanched the wound firmly with her hand. "No."

He turned back and the look in his eyes was frightening.

"Compassion is all well and good in books, girl, but if they reach the *Blessing* before us, we don't stand a chance getting around the Neck."

"They will die here anyway, Kishion. But they are my father's subjects. I'll not murder them."

"I'm not asking you to do it, Lady Maia. I believe that is why your father paid for me." He turned to go again.

"No."

He turned on her savagely. "You stupid little wretch! You can't stop me! Why don't you understand this? If they make it to the ship, we are doomed here. And I will not spend a day longer in this cursed land than I must."

Maia stepped forward. "It's you who doesn't understand, Kishion. My magic is the only thing protecting us from this cursed land."

"Hardly."

"You doubt it? If you sleep further than a dozen paces from me tonight, you will not waken again. These woods will kill those soldiers before they reach the last waymarker. They will kill you as well, Kishion, if you leave me. Now put that knife down and come with me."

He looked uncertain.

She bit her lip and wrestled with her patience. "I am here because my magic will get us through the dangers that you cannot stop. My magic has found the right path, saved us weeks of wandering through these woods. But I was raised in a keep, Kishion, not the woods. I can't make it alone, and I know that." She held out her other hand. "Come with me. Please."

He folded his arms and stalked past her. In the woodlands, the grey-rank roared.

* * *

Eight waymarkers – eight days since landing on the shores below the Neck.

"I've never seen this kind of structure before," the Kishion said, stopping in wonder and running his gloved hand over the ivy-covered pillar. Sweat trickled down the grooves of his scars. The climb up to the peak had spent them both.

Maia sat on a wedge-shaped rock, trying to catch her breath. Her dress clung to her uncomfortably. She had folded her cloak and stuffed it along the lower strap of her pack so that it cushioned her side. Her long dark hair was knotted and tangled and her hands had never been so filthy, the nails cracked and uneven. A tiny memory flickered in her mind, a result of the heat undoubtedly. As a girl, she had always rounded and pumiced her nails. The little girl inside cringed at seeing the scabs and sores.

Looking up, she saw the Kishion exploring the base of several pillars. He climbed up on a large boulder and hopped to the top of a broken pillar. On his tiptoes, he craned his neck.

"I don't believe…! I must be hungrier than I thought."

"What is it?" Weariness sagged on her shoulders. The Kystrel was heavier today than usual.

"Orchards. Rubble everywhere, but I swear I see an orchard over there. Plums and 'cots. Growing up here. I must be going mad with hunger."

Foraging in the cursed woods had been difficult. They had found blackberries and chokecherries that were so sour they were hardly edible. They had not found any game animals and were forced to eat serpent as their daily meat after the dried beef had spoiled.

As Maia got to her feet, the wound on her ribs throbbed with the effort. It was tender to the touch and the flesh had been festering even after cleaning it well at a waymarker fountain. Her legs ached from the long climb and some of the seams on her leather boots had begun to split. Both of her dresses were befit a scullery girl now, not a king's daughter. A king's disinherited daughter, she reminded herself.

The Kishion climbed down quickly and led her through the maze of broken stone. Maia paused and brushed a moss-covered rock. The whispers came strongly, and the Kystrel tingled against her skin. When she had last looked at herself in a private moment, the shadowstain had

spread partway across her breasts and nearly to the hollow below her throat. Scarves would cover it now, but what would happen when it began webbing its pattern across her cheek?

"Are you coming?"

Maia nodded and bunched her skirts so she could climb over the broken blocks of cut stone. Whispers flitted through her mind as she followed the Kishion. This was the lost city, the final bastion of defense against a devastating enemy. An enemy that would destroy every living thing. The rock was blasted and chiseled. Once there had been markings that had been destroyed when the city fell. Symbols of suns and stars and round windows paned with gold. It was all broken, crushed as if some giant boot had stepped on the mountain. *This is the place where death was born*.

"My eyes aren't deceiving me. Look at this!"

The Kishion bounded ahead towards a grove of towering trees. With a coughing chuckle, he reached up and plucked a fleshy apricot from the branch of the nearest tree.

"Don't taste it," Maia warned. She followed him to the trees where she found another waymarker. This one was smaller, only up to her knees, but the face carved on it was glowing from an inner power, as if fed by magic other than her Kystrel.

"Poisoned?"

"I don't know."

Maia knelt by the stone and touched it. "No, it's safe to eat. The magic of this place… it is frightening. Look, there's another one. Over there too. Stones ring this orchard and make the trees flourish." Maia looked up and saw juice dribbling down the Kishion's chin.

"Taste it," he said, running his arm across his mouth. "Not even the Nestors grow fruit this sweet. I can't believe it's ripe."

Maia took the fruit and bit into it. Flavor rolled across her tongue, jolting her. "I think this is the wrong season," she said after swallowing. "But they are ripe. All of them. Pluck some more. We can eat them on the way back."

Maia and the Kishion wandered the orchard, seeing a variety of trees and vegetables hoarded together in a spot.

"This green one is tough and pebbled. Let's try a knife." The Kishion slit open the fruit, revealing a thick round core the size and shape of a walnut and a greenish fruit inside. He bit into it and spat it out. "I'm sure it is ripe, but the texture. It's not sweet at all."

Maia gave it a taste and liked its peculiar consistency. "I like it. Gather some more."

They sat in the midst of the strange orchard and feasted on their find. Crunchy carrots and heads of cabbage along with the sweetest, tartest apples she had ever tasted. It made her forget for a moment how difficult the journey had been. She looked up at the scar-faced Kishion and saw a smirk on his mouth.

"What is amusing you?"

"You've a bit of strawb'ry stuck in your teeth…my Lady."

She nudged herself away from him and used her tongue to try and find it. She turned back. "Is it gone?"

He started to chuckle and shook his head.

"Stop laughing at me," she said, feeling a little giggle well up inside her. "This is embarrassing."

He stretched back and rested his head on his hands. "You're teasing it out. Almost got it. There you are, lass."

Maia looked down at the speck of red on her finger. She looked over at the Kishion. "I think

this is the first time I've seen you smile."

He sobered quickly and sat up. Anger stormed across his eyes, and he stood and brushed off his pants. "What are we doing wasting our…come on. Let's finish your errand."

Maia wondered what she had done to make him angry. "You must not have much to smile about."

He stood with feet apart, arms folded over his chest and glared at her. "Oh I find humor enough, Lady. I don't need your pity or your sympathy. Look at you. Daughter of a king who fell in love with his wife's handmaiden. Disinherited you so that her brood could rule after him. Fat healthy sons. Fat lazy sons. Yet he chooses you to save his kingdom." He snorted. "Because he knows you will be killed by the Dochte Mandar doing so. Two troubles solved in one. I'm a hireling, Lady, but I'm not stupid. Save your sympathy for yourself."

He walked away, slapping a branch away from his eyes as he stormed off.

His words stung her more deeply than the knife he had cut her with days ago. It was intentional. Her heart went black with anger and the Kystrel flared up inside her. She wanted to use it, to make him feel what she was feeling. Betrayal, hate, jealousy, self-pity, despair. For an instant, it tottered in her control, almost slipping free. She closed her eyes and swallowed, trying to keep the balance in check. A little rumble of thunder came over the orchard.

Why did I ever love you, father? she whispered in her mind. But there were many reasons she had accepted this path. Trying to please father was only one of them.

Slowly, she got to her feet and followed the Kishion outside the borders of the stones fencing the lush orchard in.

* * *

They had spent nearly a day searching the ruins before they found it. Each moment they wasted in the search had lessened the chance that the *Blessing* would wait for them across the Neck. Maia approached a heavy slab on two thick pillars leading into a stone opening. A thin well of stairs descended into total blackness.

"Are you sure this is the place?" the Kishion asked. He swung around his pack and pulled out a bundle of torches.

"I won't need those." The air rising from the darkness smelled dusty. A feeling of blackness emanated from it along with whispers. It was the entrance to a series of underground chambers. Nearly every Dochte Mandar who mastered a Kystrel had come to this spot to prove himself. "Wait for me here."

The Kishion grabbed her arm and stopped her. "I'm going with you."

Maia shook her head. "You can't."

"I do as I please. I'm your protector, if…"

"You cannot protect me from what is down there."

"And just what is down there, Lady?" he asked, angry.

"This place is called Basilides. I came to speak to ghosts, Kishion. Before my father drove the Dochte Mandar from his kingdom, he took the books holding the secrets of the order. The secrets of the Kystrel and how to forge one. The use of the magic and its consequences. I've memorized the pages. I know what to expect and how to survive them. But the magic will kill you if you follow me. This is a dead place, Kishion. This is the land where death was born."

He looked at her face, saying nothing, and turned his back to her while she descended the

steps. She looked back once, seeing the lines of tension in his neck and watched him start to pace. Facing the darkness below, she finished the steps into it. The Kystrel began to burn against her skin. Darkness faded as a mossy green light lit the grooves carved into the walls of stone. Spider web patterns of intertwining sigils lit the way before her, revealing a dusty floor with footprints going in and out. She walked confidently, listening to the whispers of the place offer direction. A side tunnel beckoned her with sweet and tantalizing smells, but the whispers warned her against following them. Deeper into the maze she walked, hearing only the scuffing sound of her boots and each spent breath. It grew colder and colder.

At one junction she stopped, seeing a radiant blue light shining from a tall archway. It appeared to rise up sharply, perhaps leading back to the surface. A breeze hit her face and she smelled flowering alyssum and the calming scent of pine. The whispers stopped her as she took her first step toward the archway. The magic of that place was strong – too strong. The Dochte Mandar who had fallen for its lure had never come back. She hesitated, drawn to the mysterious path. There were other choices as well, and the whispers showed her the true path ahead. Maia bit her lip, wavering. What was the source of the blue light? What magic guarded it?

The Kystrel flared white hot, burning her, and she gasped with pain. It brought her back to her senses. Hurriedly, she chose the right path and left the archway behind. The Kystrel cooled immediately. Another set of steps had been carved from the rock leading deeper into the mountainside. The magic traced the patterns on the rocks continually, revealing just enough of the path ahead that she did not fear stumbling and swallowing the path behind her with darkness so that she could not see the way back.

The path ended.

Maia felt a prickling of gooseflesh go up her arms as she stepped into a box-shaped room. The designs on the walls ended, leaving the walls smooth and unmarked. Before her stood a door made of stone – marked with an engraving of the Kystrel on both doors. The symbols were as large as platters, a whorl of leaves and vines and seaweed. Magic thrummed in her ears. She approached the doors slowly, knowing the words that would open them.

"*Och monde elles brir*," she said.

Before she could start the next line of the dirge, the doors opened to a rush of falling water and mist. Maia shielded her face. The room beyond was a huge underground cave. At least three underground rivers converged and dumped down as waterfalls in various positions, causing the spume and the dampness. Glowing lichen offered just enough weak light to see. She entered the room and the doors swung shut with a thud. Spinning around, she saw a corpse on the floor wearing black robes marked with the sigils of the Dochte Mandar. Two more were sprawled on the other side. Horror caught in her throat and she went back to the doors.

"*Och monde elles brir*!"

Nothing happened.

"Och cor shan arbir!"

Again, nothing. She finished the dirge but she already knew that the doors would not open to her. Maia wrestled with feelings of hopelessness and despair as her dress and cloak swiftly became soaked with the heavy mists.

"What have I done? What did I do wrong? I followed all the instructions!" She paced around the entryway, too stunned to think. Had she followed a trick path and trapped herself down here? How long would the Kishion wait for her before leaving for the ship? Anxiety threatened to shake her apart and tears stung her eyes. No, she had come too far to fail now! Water dripped down her

hair and face and she raised the cowl to cover herself. She shivered and stood still, trying to master herself again. She folded her arms tightly and breathed slowly. The roar of the waterfalls made it difficult to think about anything.

"Come on, Maia. Think!" How had these Dochte Mandar died? She bit her lip and stared at one of the robed skeletons near the door. Finding a thin sliver of courage, she approached the body and knelt beside it. She tried to sink inside herself, to banish the fury of the water and listen for the whispers. Reaching out, she touched the frail form.

The man had died over a year ago. He was a young man from Moritain, barely eighteen. He had thought himself strong enough with the Kystrel to approach the oracle of Basilides to find a cure for his ailing mother. Maia felt sick to her stomach. His provisions had only lasted a week. Tugging open his robe, she saw a Kystrel fused to his chestbone.

The whispers had made her lightheaded, but they told her something else. This was the place of the oracle. The boy had not successfully invoked the summoning and had not been able to leave. The price of failure? She went to the next body to learn its story. It was another dunking into a froth of despair. That man was older, in his forties, when he sought for the oracle. He too had failed to summon a ghost from the dead.

Maia stopped touching them. Perhaps that was how they all had failed. Perhaps fear at seeing the failure of others had poisoned their resolve to summon the oracle. There were other bodies, some decayed to the point of smudges on the slick stone floor. As she stood, she felt the weight of the sopping cloak and the heaviness of her wet dress. Without looking back at the doors, she walked through the mist and felt it caress her cheeks. She wiped wet hair from her face. The mist thinned just enough to see the edge of a stone outcropping, its edge barely wide enough for her boots. Peering off the edge, she saw a swirling whirlpool fed by three or four waterfalls. An outcropping wrapped its way across the outer edge of the cavern, descending slowly. The sight of the whirlpool scudded through her senses. She bit her lip. The whorl of the Kystrel – a similitude.

Inching along, she crossed the outcropping, hugging the wall with her body. The lip of rock was treacherous, but she calmed herself and thought that it had been no easier climbing down the rope ladder into the dinghy days ago. Shuffle, step, shuffle, step. It felt like hours, though it did not take that long before the path widened suddenly and opened to a small landing. Strange purple lichen covered the rocks in a mesh, but as she stepped on it, the stones below the lichen glowed with green light. The landing opened at the base of the waterfalls and along the shore of the seething underground lake. A single waymarker rose from the edge of the water, its features startlingly clear and burning with magic.

With the muffled sound of her boots crunching in the sand, she approached it. A thrill of hope clashed with a sense of doom. She wiped her mouth and then reached for the stone. The whispers confirmed her assumption.

This was the oracle of Basilides.

Maia sighed and then stepped back from the stone. She knelt in the sand and pulled the pack off her shoulders. For a moment, she listened to the roar of the waves and then quickly went to work. From the pack, she withdrew a small bundle wrapped in cloth and secured with a leather thong. Inside were twelve flat stones, each one chipped and marked with the proper runes learned from the book of the Dochte Mandar. She knew the order readily, having memorized it. But the difficult part was coming. Would she be able to communicate with the spirit? Maia was good with languages. She had studied them all her life. First as a princess, knowing that she might marry a foreign king and be expected to know his tongue. But after her father had disinherited her, she had

studied languages as a way of escaping the pain of her father's betrayal. The irony of it still sent pangs through her. Her father had cast the Dochte Mandar from his realm so that he might disannul his daughter. Now he needed the language of the Dochte Mandar to save his kingdom. And only his firstborn, his daughter, was skilled enough in languages to attempt the effort. Bitterness welled inside her. She thrust it down.

Setting the stones in the proper order around her, she looked at the circle they formed. They would protect her from being so near the dead. With one hand, she pulled the cowl from her head. Water dripped from the tip of her nose. Fear seeped into her bones. She tried to speak, but could not.

She tried again.

"*Och monde elles brir. Och cor shan arbir. Och aether undes pune. Dekem millia orior sidune.*"

A prickle went down her spine. Closing her eyes, she summoned the Kystrel's magic and felt the glow of the small stones on her face. She repeated the dirge of the Dochte Mandar again.

"*Och monde elles brir. Och cor shan arbir. Och aether undes pune. Dekem millia orior sidune.*"

Something moved in the waters.

Maia felt a tug of terror in her bones, the desire to flee back to the doors. She wanted to open her eyes but she knew that would destroy her. It led to madness. Whispers swirled about her. The thunder of the waterfalls grew louder, overcoming the lapping sound of the waves against the sand. Maia felt coldness wrap around her, a coldness that went deeper than bones. The Kystrel burned against her chest, protecting her, keeping her warm.

Something brushed against her hair. A finger? A breeze?

The whispers stopped.

Instead, images began to coalesce in her thoughts.

–A world of noise…the woods sharing a single heart…the anvil of heaven below…a million stars yet to be born–

It was the dirge spoken in images, each one wrapping the last like a cocoon.

–Welcome, Daughter. What do you seek? What do you desire? What is your gift? –

Astonishment rippled through Maia. The voice in her mind, the images she saw, were silvered by the presence of a woman. She felt something brush against her cheek. A caress?

"Do you know…my tongue?" Maia asked.

–It is your thoughts that speak loudest to us. What do you seek? What do you desire? What is your gift? –

Maia thought back to the book. Three questions she was allowed to ask. To expect more than this from the dead was perilous.

"What is the nameless plague that afflicts my father's kingdom? The books of the Dochte Mandar, they hint at it. They seem to know it and know a way to tame it. But what is it? What causes it?"

Maia's mind filled with images. The troubles had begun years ago and slowly increased. Husbands abandoning the farms to cross the sea. Mothers drowning their babes in buckets or troughs. Children stoning children. It happened among the wealthy and the base, in winter and summer. And it was getting worse. Each year was getting gravely worse.

–You are plagued by the Myriad Ones, the Unborn. They infest the wild things first. They encroach upon the living as spiders and rodents until they learn your secret fears. They come as wolves and bats until the fears are deepest. Then they come as man. What do you desire?–

The images made Maia shiver with cold and loathing. She understood more now. The spiders

and ticks and serpents that had plagued the land below the Neck. The beast from the woods. The cursed lands teemed with them – the Myriad Ones. The Unborn.

Maia tried to speak, but her jaw chattered so much she could hardly get the words out. "How does one…how can we fight them? Do the Dochte Mandar keep them at bay?"

–Daughter, they cannot be destroyed. They can only be subdued. We lost our fight against them, Daughter. They prevailed against us. –

"But surely there must be…"

She felt the anger in the images, the anger caused by her interruption. Maia quieted, struggling with the thoughts that spun through her mind.

–There is a record of our struggles against the Myriad Ones. Seek the High Scribe of the Dochte Mandar. She carries the record. What is your gift? –

Again Maia was flustered. The image was clear as a sky free of clouds. A woman in the Dochte Mandar? The land of the Dochte Mandar was far to the north, the hub of all the kingdoms. They killed any woman caught tampering to make or using a Kystrel. It was hundreds of leagues away to the north, past three other kingdoms sworn to obey the Dochte Mandar's order. Despair struck her heart.

"Is there no…is there any other way?"

–What is your gift? –

Maia barely heard the question. She knew it was coming though. She had been prepared since she had first read the book and made her Kystrel. It was the gift required of a Dochte Mandar.

"I give my life."

A sense of certainty settled into her bones.

–Your gift is accepted. Go now, Daughter. Seek the High Scribe of the Dochte Mandar. Invoke the storms to hold your ship at bay. Hasten on your journey, lest the Unborn claim them all. –

A single image struck her mind before the woman's thoughts abandoned Maia. The Myriad Ones attacked the Kishion outside.

* * *

Maia heard the sounds of the fight before she saw it. A ruckus of yelps and shrieks and barks flooded down the length of the tunnel. The noises grated down her spine and filled her with loathing and despair. As she jumped the last of the stairs and left the lair of the oracle, her stomach seized with fear. The Kishion stood against a dozen black wolves. Others padded in a circle through the ruins, raising their muzzles to the sky and howling like trumps. The Kishion's legs were slashed and bleeding, his pants a wreckage of blood-soaked tatters. Dead wolves lay twitching and snorting by the steps near him as he danced from one rock to another, one pillar to another, his blades spilling death with every stroke. As Maia tried to call for him, the black wolves barked and charged towards her.

Maia breathed in to use the Kystrel when she was crushed to the floor. The smell of sweat and vomit, the feeling of hands and knees as they kicked and punched at her, smothering her under their weight.

"It's around her neck! Pull it off! Hurry now!"

Maia felt strong hands tug at her cloak, choking her with their frenzy to get at the Kystrel. It was Rawlt's voice and she was aware of another man also nearby. She struggled to breathe and kicked out, but their weight made her bones groan.

"The chain! Yank it off her!"

Several buttons on her bodice popped and she felt the dirty hand grab the coin-sized medallion and tighten into a fist.

"I got it! I got it!"

"Yank it loose! Hurry man, yank it loose!"

Fire exploded from the Kystrel in a blaze of white-hot heat. Someone screamed and howled with pain. Maia nearly blacked out when Rawlt slammed her head against the stones. The Kystrel flared again, blasting a wave of resentment and fury throughout the ruins. Maia felt it building inside her, a wave of power that joined with her anger, her self-pity, her rejection. The cup overflowed, and the Kystrel's power subsumed her. Thunder boomed overhead and wind razed the ruins. Tongues of lightning flashed, blinding her even behind her eyelids. The weight left her body and she fought to her feet, gripping the stone pillar to stand. Pressure in her ears swelled, the pain becoming unbearable. Still the force writhed and roiled causing more thunder and the sky to darken like dusk.

Maia felt the magic of the place go through her, wakening within her a source of strength and sense of freedom. It was power. Pure power. Bellowing thunder threatened to rip the sky apart. The earth spasmed, sending jolting shockwaves through the ruins, toppling boulders.

She was spent, empty, dead inside.

Maia sagged to her knees as the letdown from using the magic took everything from her. Thunder continued to boil in the sky for several moments but the wind calmed and the trembling earth quieted leaving nothing, not even the chirping of a cricket. She collapsed, her mind numb. There were no dreams. Only blackness.

* * *

She heard the Kishion's staggering steps and then his weight settled nearby. Pain throbbed in her skull. It hurt to breathe.

"You jolted. Are you awake, Maia?"

She tried to open her eyes and failed. Every morsel of strength had fled from her body. She felt weaker than a blind pup nosing for her mother's milk.

"I think so," she whispered. She struggled to rise and felt his hands assist her. Her body felt like the belltowers in the keep after a victory had been rung, the stones still thrumming with the echoes.

The Kishion pressed a waterflask to her lips and she drank. She coughed a little and finally opened her eyes.

New scars would be added to his countenance. He looked as if he'd been caught in a farmer's field during a sickle harvest. The gloves were gone and little rags tied the cuts in his hands and arms. His legs were similarly treated.

"How long after I left did they attack you?"

A little quirk turned his lip. "That doesn't matter, Lady. What matters is you saved me."

She reached up to scratch her brow and it stung terribly.

"Don't touch that! I've hardly started treating you. Foolish girl."

Maia sighed and let her hand drop to her lap. "It was Rawlt and the other one, wasn't it?"

A small nod. "We never bothered hiding our trail. I thought they would flee for the ship. Probably thought your head was worth a great deal."

"I should have let you kill them."

He snorted. "Maybe you'll start listening to me."

"I'm going to have to, aren't I?"

He looked at her with confusion. "What do you mean?"

Maia's head still throbbed, but she reached out and grabbed his scabbed hand. "I have the answers I came here for. But they are not what I had hoped to find. Our journey is not over. It is only beginning." She sighed, seeing images of her father flash through her mind jumbling with all her reasons. It would be a long, tedious death. "It is only beginning."

He looked down at her hand. "Where must I take you?" His voice was raw, a sigh.

"I think you already know. I think we've both known all along."

Looking up into her eyes, he nodded again. "We go to the Dochte Mandar."

THE END

Leave a message about this story.

Continued from page 23

Shya had immediately recognized it. Several hundred Shya'ling once lived here, in Otherealm, over a thousand years ago, before the land began shrinking and they were forced to flee through the dimensional gateway into Gabby's world. Less than a dozen of the Shya'ling existed today. Gabby guessed it must be the same with the Jakkaryl.

"Is it true, Shya, that the Jakkaryl will grant a wish to whoever possesses it, in exchange for its freedom?"

Shya shook his head. "I cannot say, but I think that is only a rumor. My kind never had need to catch a Jakkaryl when we lived in Otherealm. Stories told by my ancestors say they were rare even then, and no one has ever seen more than one at a time."

Gabby scowled, disheartened by this news. "The king's mage insists that it grants wishes. He says the king will have unlimited wealth and power once in possession of a Jakkaryl. That's why King Uln sent me here. But if the legend is a lie, and the king's wish cannot be granted, Galen will be killed anyway. And more than likely, so will I."

Shya clacked his beaked mouth, appearing pensive. "Do not underestimate the knowledge and power of a mage. They visited Otherealm often when the land was whole and flourishing with magic. I hold them responsible for causing my world to shrink to the few miles that are left. Mages have been draining off its magic for centuries. Soon there will be nothing left." He cocked his scaled head, his oval eyes glittering like purple crystals. "Who knows what the king's mage really wants with the Jakkaryl?"

Gabby stood and brushed the crushed silver leaves off her tattered britches. "Well, whatever the creature's purpose, I need it for the ransom I must pay for Galen's life."

"If the legend is true, perhaps once caught, the Jakkaryl will grant you a wish; a wish for your brother's life and his freedom."

"I already thought of that, and so had the king." Gabby peered into the bushes, struggling to catch sight of the blue-furred pixie. Her chat with Shya just renewed her resolve. She'd not give up her search for the elusive Jakkaryl. Her younger brother's life meant more to her than her own; Galen was all the family she had left. "If I used the wish, King Uln's mage would sense the Jakkaryl's magic and Galen would be executed right then and there."

As Gabby slowly circled the thorn bush, Shya ambled up behind her. "So why does the mage not come here to capture the Jakkaryl himself?"

Gabby turned to glower down at him. She shouted, "For Vetta's sake, Shya, you know why!"

Startled, the Shya'ling leapt back, his wings flung out for balance.

"Only by wing of a Shya'ling can the gateway to Otherealm be crossed. Your fellow creatures would rather die than serve a mage." Gabby paused, furious over the way she and Shya were being used. Her tone softened when she saw the hurt in Shya's faceted eyes. "I've been here three days, Shya, and we have less than two shadow's time to catch this thing. Are you going to help me or not?"

"I have been helping you," Shya said, his voice edged with a whine. "You would not have known what a Jakkaryl looked like if not for me."

"You're right." She smiled and knelt before him, her eyes even with his. She reached out to smooth the ruffled feathers and scales along his neck. Shya was the best friend she had, and nearly as close to her as Galen. The winged beast had stayed with her family for generations, keeping watch over them, protecting them from harm as best he could.

But Shya couldn't stop the fever that had overtaken almost everyone in Gabby's village five years ago, her parents and grandparents included. Only fifteen years old at the time, Gabby had

narrowly survived the sickness, as had her brother, who'd been little more than eight. She realized that saving Galen must mean as much to Shya as it did to her. "Please forgive me, Shya. My failure in catching the Jakkaryl has shortened my temper. I don't mean to take it out on you."

"I understand, mistress." He dipped his head and rubbed his silky feathers against her cheek. She scratched the horn-like scales that surrounded his ears, and was comforted by his hum of pleasure. They shouldn't be at odds, especially not now, when their need for each other was so great.

"Are you hungry, mistress?" Shya asked with enthusiasm. "There are still some rations left in your pack. I will fetch them for you." He turned and hopped toward the crumpled leather pack she'd dropped at the side of the trail.

Gabby sighed as she again searched the thick branches of the bush. The Jakkaryl was probably still in there, hiding, watching. How odd that throughout the time she had stalked it, the Jakkaryl never escaped very far. The moment she'd think it had vanished, it would pop out from behind a rock or a tree, then scamper to a new hiding place, as if taunting her into another pursuit. Gabby had grown tired of its games, and now she grew hungry as well.

"I suppose taking a little time to fill my belly won't make much difference," she said, glancing up at the fruit-laden trees that bordered the trail. "I just wish I could eat some of what grows here."

"You can," Shya said, his words muffled as his beak poked its way into the near-empty pack. "But it will do you no good. No matter how much you ate, you would never become full."

Shya was right. Though plentiful with fruits and vegetables, edible roots and seeds, not one ounce of nutrition could be found in the food grown in Otherealm. At least not for anyone from Gabby's world. From the ancient Book of Otherealm, which was required reading in the village school, Gabby had learned that nothing here could nourish someone who wasn't native to the land. The food tasted of ambrosia, rich and sweet, yet none contained sustenance for the body. One would starve if left to dine solely on the phantom resources of this land. But Shya thrived on the bounty here. He made daily journeys through the gateway to feast on native roots and plants. Without it, he would die, as would the few others left of his kind.

"I found some strips of dried Yoma meat, mistress, and a satchel of what remains of the Bethoma berries." Shya clutched the leathery meat in his talons, the satchel dangling from his hooked beak. He half-hopped, half-flew to where Gabby sat beneath an enormous tree heavy with fruit. He dropped his burden at her feet before picking through a pile of fallen orange orbs, searching for one that hadn't suffered too much bruising.

Gabby removed her gloves and gnawed on one of the meat strips, watching her friend tear the rind off a piece of fruit. She began to idly hum a tune her mother had often played on her reed-flute, then quickly stopped herself. Legend said that music would drive a Jakkaryl to flee faster than shooing one away.

Shya jerked his head up and stared at her quizzically. "Why do you halt the tune that vibrates from your throat? I wish I could sing, and would love to hear it from you."

"I don't want to frighten the Jakkaryl."

Shya grunted and returned to pecking at the fruit he had found. "Another rumor, I suspect. It appears your people's Book of Otherealm is full of them."

Gabby considered what he said, recalling some of what the elder mages had recorded in the great book. Most were laws of behavior that focused on what not to do in Otherealm. She knew of no one ever proving them false, or true for that matter. She guessed few had tested the laws because

breaking them might cause harm, or even death, to whoever took the risk. She had visited Otherealm only twice before, feeling too nervous both times to remain more than a single shadow's time. She had wanted to explore the magical land, to venture through the strange forests of gnarled trees with purple bark, to spy upon the odd-looking animals that grazed on blue-grassed plains, to wade through streams of silver water that glittered beneath Otherealm's cloudless sky. But like so many others, she'd been too afraid. And now that she was finally here again, she experienced no joy in the wonders around her.

"Tell me, Shya," Gabby began, her suspicions over the truth of Otherealm coming to a peak. She poured the remaining Bethoma berries into her palm and tossed one in her mouth. While chewing, she asked, "What will happen when Otherealm finally vanishes completely?"

Shya didn't look up as he pulled a juicy segment from the peeled fruit and slurped it down. "I suppose the Shya'ling will slowly starve and cease to exist. The Jakkaryl are doomed to vanish as well, as will all the inhabitants here." He bent his long neck to wipe his beak on the grassy ground, then glanced up at the lavender sky, where Otherealm's sun-star hung almost centered above them. "The Shya'ling are peaceful beasts, who have done no harm to the people of your world. I only hope we are well remembered after we are gone."

A sudden flash of rage sizzled up Gabby's spine, her anger directed at a selfish king who conspired to destroy an innocent land for personal gain. But once the mages used up the magic of Otherealm, would magic be gone for good? Would the extinction of the mages' source of power weaken the king's tyrannic rule over his people? Only then might her village find enough strength to rise against King Uln and his army of soon-to-be impotent sorcerers. But the price of freedom would be great; a magical world must die in order for her people to find relief from King Uln's tyranny.

Gabby stood and stomped her foot on the ground, causing the thorn bush's branches to quake. As the leaves rustled into bell-like song, her voice rose above it. "Why has it come to this, Shya? Why did the Shya'ling not attack the mages of my world in retaliation?"

"I told you, mistress," a puzzled Shya began, the scaled horns on his head arching like human brows. "We are peaceful creatures. It is not in our nature to…"

"But your passiveness is destroying your own world! Had the Shya'ling fought to overpower the mages, our two worlds could have existed in harmony." Gabby grabbed a branch from the bush, paying no heed to the thorns that pierced her scarred and calloused hand. "Somewhere in here hides the key to ending our problem. If I catch the Jakkaryl and free my brother, I allow King Uln to make a wish that will undoubtedly keep my people in cruel servitude forever. Is that fair?"

Without waiting for an answer, Gabby dropped to her knees before Shya, clutching his wings in a desperate embrace. "Help me, Shya! Tell me what to do." She buried her face in the plush feathers that covered Shya's broad chest.

Shya combed his beak through the tangles of Gabby's yellow, short-cropped hair, freeing the silver leaves that had caught there. "Oh, mistress. I cannot make the choice for you. It appears no good will come of any decision made. Ignore the king's command, and young Galen dies, while King Uln continues his reign as before. Fulfill your quest, and provide the king with great power that will ensure your people's oppression for years to come. Either way, the destiny of Otherealm does not change. My world cannot survive as long as there are mages to siphon off its magic."

Shya's words made sense, but they provided no comfort. "So whatever I decide, the outcome remains the same."

"That is right, mistress."

There were limits to what she was willing to sacrifice, and giving up her brother's life would only be in vain. "Then saving Galen's life is my best choice."

Shya offered no response. He moved away from her and trudged slowly back to the pack laying beside the trail. He prodded the opening with his talons and poked his beak inside. Gabby wondered what he was up to. He had already brought her the remains of her rations, and little else was left but her hunting knife and some candles.

She again rebuked herself for spouting off impulsive words that had hurt her winged friend. His kind were indeed gentle in nature, and it was wrong of her to find fault in their lack of aggression. After all, it was far too late to instigate a revolt now. An attack on the king's mages might have worked several centuries ago, when the Shya'ling were strong in number. But many had perished over the centuries, usually at the hands of mages who used their feathers and scales for potions and spells. The remaining few hid in caves or took refuge in the dense forests surrounding Gabby's village. Like guardian angels, they secretly brought pilfered food to starving villagers and stole medicine from King Uln's healers to give to the sick. The Shya'ling could safely return to Otherealm now, as their population dwindled to accommodate their shrinking world, but they chose not to. Instead they devoted themselves to helping the unfortunate souls of Gabby's village. Out of instinct or conscience — Gabby wasn't sure which — the Shya'ling would not turn their backs on the helpless.

"What do you have there, Shya?" Gabby asked, when she saw something clutched in the animal's beak.

He gently pulled it free with his talons. It was her mother's reed-flute. "I thought this might bring you comfort, mistress." He peered up at the sky, then hung his head low, wagging it slowly. "I fear time has run out; the sun-star is at its zenith. Perhaps a song will lighten your heart."

Gabby's belly felt suddenly weighted, as if what little food she'd eaten had swelled and would soon climb its way back up her throat. Poor Galen. She had failed her mission and his death was on her head. She pushed the flute away. It dropped to the ground and rolled beneath the thorn bush.

"All is lost, Shya." Gabby's eyes filled and she batted away the tear that dripped onto her cheek. "I'm responsible for my brother's death."

"You do not know he is dead, mistress. Perhaps…" Shya cut himself short, jerking his head at the thorn bush. He frowned and said, "Look."

Gabby swiveled her tear-glazed eyes toward the bush. The flute rolled out from beneath it, stopped, then rolled closer until it rested at her feet. She stared at it dumbly.

"Take it," Shya said.

"But…"

"I think someone wants to hear a song."

"The Jakkaryl? I thought they hate music."

Shya clacked his beak. "Legends are only myths until proven otherwise. What have you to lose?"

Gabby heard the truth in his words. Why not play? Her time was up, after all. And if Galen was dead, a tune once played by their mother would serve well as tribute to his innocent soul. She plucked the flute from the grass, her hands shaking, as she struggled to recall where to place her fingers.

"Listen," Shya said.

Not having yet blown a single note, she tilted the flute from her lips. "To what? I don't hear

anything."

"And neither does Otherealm. For centuries, only the wind has sung, accompanied by rustling leaves and the stream splashing against the rocks. But never any real music.

"Please," Shya said, nodding at the flute. "Play for us. Play the first string of notes ever heard in Otherealm."

Gabby was no musician, but her mother had taught her a few tunes when she was small. She hadn't played for years. Her heart heavy with the loss of her brother, she lifted the flute to lips that quivered with emotion. "*For you, Galen*," she whispered.

The first note came out shrill but sweet, and she held it long before following it with staccato twitters that covered the scale. The song she sought came quickly to her then, a tune her mother had called *An Ode to Vetta*. There were words to go with it, and Gabby sang them in her mind as she played:

> To Otherealm her heart belongs,
> For Vetta's magic weaves this song.
> Peace and truth will bind the spell
> That keeps her village safe and well.
> And when she hears this song once more,
> Vetta's return will banish lore
> That heeds lies made by mage and king,
> Who do not love the Shya'ling.
> For those great creatures hold the spell
> That keeps Vetta's village safe and well.

Shya swayed in rhythm with the song, his faceted eyes closed, his scaly cheeks wet with tears. He had heard Gabby's mother play it many times, and it undoubtedly brought back fond memories of their life as a family.

Gabby continued to play, her neck and shoulders tingling with the lovely sounds made by the flute. The air filled with her music, and she hoped Galen's spirit could hear it as he flew toward the awaiting heavens. May his soul find peace in Vetta's arms.

The thorn bush quaked its silver leaves, tinkling in harmony with the flute's airy song. Yet there was no breeze to move it. Gabby noticed something blue sway among the branches. It came out into the open, the tiny creature's white face creased with a beatific smile. The Jakkaryl danced beneath the leaves, yanking one from a branch to twirl above its head as it spun around in dainty circles.

Gabby almost stopped playing, but dared not. The Jakkaryl might go back into hiding if she did. It was too late to catch it now, and far too cruel to even consider, so she was content to simply watch the pixie dance.

A glittering halo appeared above the Jakkaryl's head. It spun as the Jakkaryl did, then lowered to sprinkle glitter around the small, twirling body. Its blue fur sparkled, then began to fade as the creature seemed to grow larger, spinning faster and faster until it became no more than a blur. Gabby's gasp left her without air to blow through the flute, so she had no choice but to stop playing.

She glanced over at Shya, whose eyes widened in awe. "What's happening, Shya?"

Shya's neck convulsed when he swallowed. "A miracle, mistress."

Gabby returned her attention to the Jakkaryl, which was no longer a Jakkaryl at all. The

woman standing before her had hair of silver, long tendrils of it curling down her shoulders and hanging just below her slender waist. She was not young, but neither was she old. Her violet eyes smiled brightly from a pale face that glowed with pure joy. A garland of flowers hung around her neck, and when she moved her arms, the sleeves of her gown glimmered with colors of the rainbow.

"Who is she?" Gabby whispered, while rising slowly to her feet, fearful of breaking whatever spell had created this apparition. The woman did not appear ghostly, yet spirit seemed to describe her best.

Before Shya could answer, the woman spoke. "I am Vetta."

Gabby stepped back, surprise making her limbs weak, her knees almost buckling beneath her.

Shya smiled.

"Yes, my dear Shya'ling. You remember me, though your eyes have never seen me before now." Vetta glided toward him, her feet seeming not to reach the ground. She petted Shya's head and he leaned into the caress, eyes closed, a pleasant purr sounding from his throat.

"Where is the Jakkaryl?" Gabby asked.

"I am the Jakkaryl," Vetta said.

"You mean there is — was — only one, all along?"

Vetta nodded.

"But my brother... Galen is dead because I failed to catch you and bring you back to King Uln so that he can make his wish."

Vetta shook her head and crooked a finger. "Come, child. I have something wonderful to show you."

Gabby and Shya followed her to the other side of the thorn bush. Beneath the prickly branches lay Galen, curled up on his side with his eyes closed, his shoulders heaving with the deep breaths of a sound sleep.

Vetta knelt beside him and ran her long, pale fingers across his forehead. "Hush," she warned Gabby. "Do not wake your brother. My bringing him here has caused great stress to his fragile human body. He needs rest now."

Gabby held both hands to her mouth, stifling the cry of joy that swelled inside her throat. Galen was alive! But she had failed her quest; she'd not captured the Jakkaryl as promised.

Vetta caught Gabby by the shoulders and gingerly lowered her to sit beside her brother. She cupped Gabby's face with her hands. "Sweet child. So much has happened to you, to your brother. I am so sorry I could not help you sooner."

"I don't understand. I thought you... I thought the ancient sorceress Vetta was…"

"Dead?" Vetta smiled. "That is what my husband wanted you, and all the villagers, to believe."

She sat on the grass beside Gabby and wrapped her arm around Shya, pulling him close. "Over a thousand years ago, my husband Corynth, a powerful mage, was as much in love with Otherealm as I. We both used the magic of this place, never failing to give back whatever we took. But Corynth became corrupted by the power gleaned from this world. He stopped returning what he took, and the land began to shrink. He discovered great fortune could be won from King Fortean, a weak and selfish man, who adored Corynth for his clever use of magic. Corynth came to love the king, and began hating me when I objected to his thievery of Otherealm. I cast a spell over the trees and plants that grew food, making sure none of it could be stolen as well. Corynth put a stop to my meddling by changing me into the Jakkaryl. But before I lost all my power, I cast one last spell, forcing an oath from the Shya'ling to watch over my people — your people, Gabby. And

to keep all mages away from Otherealm."

Shya averted his eyes in shame. "But mages killed most of us for our feathers and scales to make potions that helped them cross through the gateway."

"That is not your fault, Shya. My husband was a clever mage, and before he died, he passed his spells on to his apprentices, who used them to become great mages themselves. It was a chain I feared might never be broken, until Gabby came." Vetta rested solemn eyes on Gabby, then stood and sauntered to the forest's edge.

Gabby hopped to her feet. "But Vetta, I would have caught the Jakkaryl if I could, to save Galen. My playing the flute was an accident."

"There are no accidents, child," Vetta said. "The ancient Shya'ling may have provided the words to what you sang in your mind, but the tune that set me free came from you. From your family."

Gabby stared into the forest of purple trees. "And if I hadn't played the song, but captured you instead, what would the king's mage have done?"

Vetta turned to face her. "He could not force me into granting a wish, I assure you. That legend was a fool's trickery. No, I believe he meant to kill me and take my power for his own, which is something Corynth had never dared himself." She smiled warmly. "Do not fret, child. You would not have caught the Jakkaryl unless I let you. Of that you can be certain."

Gabby felt relieved, but it was time to return home. Her rations were gone, and both she and Galen would need food soon. She must prepare herself to face King Uln's wrath, and his punishment.

"May I wake Galen now? To take him home?"

Vetta scowled. "Why would you want to do that? Otherealm is your home now, should you wish to stay here."

Gabby's stomach growled, and she glanced longingly at a patch of vining vegetables that grew beneath a cluster of nearby trees. "I grow hungry, my lady. I must have food that is filling."

Vetta giggled. "I broke that spell the moment I was transformed. The food of Otherealm will nourish you and your brother well."

Live here, in Otherealm? Gabby glanced up at the cloudless sky, then peered out at the blue-grassed plains. The notion was too incredible to believe. But what about the Book of Otherealm, and the laws it contained? "The Book of Otherealm forbids many things, and I fear breaking the rules."

On the tail end of a sigh, Vetta said, "Every word of that foul book is a lie written by Corynth to keep your people from knowing the truth. I will destroy that book myself. Then I will deal with the mages and force them to return the magic they have stolen."

"Does that mean Otherealm will become whole again?"

Vetta grabbed both of Gabby's hands and gazed fiercely into her eyes. "It will take time, but yes, Otherealm will again become as it used to be."

"Gabby?" called a voice from behind her. She spun around to see Galen standing beside the thorn bush, his straw-colored hair tousled, his burlap jacket rumpled and generously covered with silver leaves. "Where are we, Gabby?"

"Home, Galen," she said. "We're home."

THE END

Leave a message about this story.

Continued from page 28

"Remember, Martin. You are a Seer."

"But what am I seeing?"

"I can only guess. Perhaps you see the intents of the sculptures, the forces that inspired their creation, the character of their framers, the power that wrought them—one of these, maybe all of these. A Seer sees all things. Beholding the true shapes of evil is the price you pay for seeing."

"But I've never seen anything like this—never . . ."

"Markeeome has awakened the gift of seeing within you. As yet you cannot control when you are a Seer and when you are not. You will behold much more of what is hidden before the days of your mortality are ended. The things you will see will be both awful and glorious. Don't disbelieve what you see because you don't understand it yet. The images are expressions of the intangible. Believe what you behold, and then try to study out its meaning. The mind of your sleep may have chosen the form of the images you see. It deals entirely in symbols. These may be symbols of energies, past and future. They touch and influence what you behold. The answer to what the dragons are probably lies within you. Whatever the answer, I promise you that the day will come when your waking mind shall also understand."

"But why did you ask what color they are? What should that matter?

"Echion is sometimes called the Dragon of Darkness, or the Black Dragon."

Sure, Palmer thought wryly, almost mockingly. Dragons. Dragons? Dragons!? One of the dragons moved, then another. Their eyes shone dull red. Their mouths, hideous and lined with wet razor teeth, gaped open. Their twisting necks began to uncoil, to turn and bend toward him.

An awful fear and confusion thrust in upon Palmer. He staggered, and Gaultor barely caught him.

"Do not think upon the dragons! Study out the meaning, yes! But do not dwell upon them," Gaultor whispered gently to Palmer.

"What's wrong?" Cosgrove came instantly.

"Nothing," Palmer lied. How could Cosgrove understand any of this? "I just stumbled, I guess. I'm all right."

"Think upon good things," Gaultor continued in kindness after they had started walking again. "The power of Echion is potent here. You can fight his evil only by thinking upon peaceable things. Otherwise, the dark things you see and feel can overwhelm you."

Without trying to reason out the credibility of Gaultor's instructions, Palmer obeyed them. He thought about Arrleen, so deeply loved, so far removed. He thought upon Beruna and his home world's glorious sunsets. He thought of the golden moons of Bronzewash and Merrisense, serene above the giant Eriadorian trees. He fought to hear, within his mind, the beautiful songs of the Night Carolers soaring above the trees of Beruna's midnight, their wings glowing and flashing among pastel colors, attracting their mates as they flew. He concentrated on every selection of glorious music he could recall. He remembered the kind words of his life, the words of praise and encouragement he had heard. He thought upon dimly remembered times of joy—the days he could recall of his parents' love and gentle tenderness for him.

Palmer forced himself to concentrate on them all.

Gradually, incredibly, the visions of perversion and motifs of thrashing dragons dissolved like a mist of fog. At last, Palmer saw the city as everyone else did. The sculptures and buildings were, again, merely abstract in their design, sweeping in their opulence. Palmer let his mind return to Arrleen once more, savoring the vividness with which he had recalled her likeness. Even so, the heavy, heart-enshrouding feelings of RoseStar persisted.

From far in the distance, Palmer heard strange whistlings and low wailing sounds like mournful, nearly silent cries. When the group hesitated, Palmer realized that they all heard it.

"Wind?" Cosgrove suggested after a moment.

As if in reply, a gust of oddly scented air brushed Palmer's face. "The city should be sealed against weather. Besides, I remember only the slightest breeze outside when we landed."

Carefully, they moved forward. The tortured sounds grew louder, mingling ever stronger between the rustling and rushing of moving air. At last, they came upon a huge, melted breach in the city's seamless, transparent dome. Its edges twisted in flash-fused drippings, black and scored. Some of these heat bubbles contorted into chance tubules. These caught and funneled the breezes into the soft howlings like strange flutes.

"This must be where my people attacked the city," Gaultor said quietly.

Palmer gazed, appalled. The dome was made of polarized Glassteel. What energies could the Mhyrnians have brought to bear that could have done this?

"Colonel," Cosgrove said. Palmer turned to look toward his voice—toward the interior of the city. "Gaultor may be right. Come over here and look."

Under the dim light, Cosgrove stood over what looked like jumbled branches and bleached rocks. It was only as Palmer drew closer that he discovered the branches to be charred bones and the bleached rocks, skulls.

Gaultor came up behind him, gazing down at the remains. Spears and swords littered the skeletons. The skulls wore the characteristic high forehead of Mhyrnians.

"Some more over here, Colonel," Cosgrove tranzed, and Palmer crossed, stepping carefully among the bones so as not to disturb them. "Human," he said when Palmer arrived. Spears were here too, impaling ribs and skulls.

"Colonel Palmer," it was Lenore. Palmer turned to see her in silhouette. "The Mhyrnian remains—some of them are charred, as if hit by depolarizer fire."

Palmer nodded. "This must have been where the Mhyrnians breached the city.

"How's Gaultor reacting?"

They looked at the shaman. "I don't know," she responded.

Gaultor stood motionless, silhouetted against the blazing blue of Procyx. Faint lights arrayed about the End Star in constellation-like rings. Stars? Presumably, yes. They twinkled rhythmically among brilliant colors, but never once stopped at white. Momentarily distracted, Palmer wondered at it, then turned his attention back to the Mhyrnian, who gazed down at the skeletons in silence.

"At least he's not openly hostile," Lenore whispered. "To expect more would be to hope for too much."

"Gaultor," Palmer walked over to him carefully. The Mhyrnian's face hid in the darkness. "How much farther until we turn inward."

There was a pause. Palmer saw his shoulders rise once from a deep breath. His voice sounded.

"This is the place. Your Federationist base lies at the center of RoseStar, several kilometers inward."

The Mhyrnian fell silent. He did not move—for minutes, he did not move.

"Will you come with us?" Palmer asked gently.

Pause.

"I will. But I must linger here for a time. These remains have not been dedicated. I must stay and take care of them."

"Colonel," Cosgrove tranzed. "We'd best move on."

Palmer's tranzed reply was quick. "Without Gaultor as our guide? We should be able to find Fed Comm's base without him, but I would prefer him with us."

"Will it take long?" Palmer asked Gaultor.

"Go on ahead, if you like."

Lenore came forward and whispered in his ear. "I think it would be best if we stayed, Colonel. Nothing we could do could make up for this—this carnage. But staying while he honors his dead is something."

"May we stay with you?" Palmer asked Gaultor. The Mhyrnian looked up, his face still dark.

"You would attend me—in the face of your urgent needs?"

Palmer hesitated, then nodded. "Yes. I know this is important."

"I shall not be long," Gaultor said, kneeling quickly upon the ground next to the remains of his people. When Lenore followed Gaultor's lead, Palmer also knelt.

"Colonel . . ." It was Cosgrove. He stopped, then knelt as well.

Gaultor bent low, as if in prayer—fists clenched. Then, finally, he began to sing softly, raising his hands high above his head. The words he sang sounded Mhyrnian. The tonal scales were different from any Palmer knew. But the beauty of the song's mournful solemnity stirred deep feelings within him. Gaultor's voice grew in timbre, the resonance flowing smoothly into near operatic perfection.

"That's not Mhyrnese," Lenore whispered urgently. "I don't know what language he's singing in."

The melody shifted into majors—full steps, half. Gaultor's large hands opened, the fingers spread, and he looked heavenward. The song now took on a familiar ring. It was glorious, expressing exultation and joy. The echoes of Gaultor's piercing voice sounded and resounded through the streets of RoseStar. As Palmer gazed at him, transfixed, he saw trails of moisture across his cheeks. His eyes glistened in coherent highlights from Procyx.

All at once, the song ended.

Silence reigned for minutes afterward. No one stirred. Even Cosgrove knelt, unmoving. Palmer heard Lenore sniffing once or twice, and he himself lingered in the afterglow of so stunning an experience.

"Colonel," The tranz was from Adams. "Trouble. Something just started jamming our long-range scanners."

"Just now?" Palmer replied. Cosgrove was on his feet. The visor in his helmet slipped down into position.

"Just now. Orders?"

"Evacuate everybody, and I mean get off the ship. Drop everything. Move."

The distant roar of thrusters crept among the buildings of the city. Palmer looked up to see a chevron of KRAS fighters scream across the face of the moon. Their afterburners blazed a brilliant blue-white. He searched the sky. There were hundreds of them, swarming about the dome—searching.

"They'll find the breach all too soon," Palmer said. "We'd better find cover."

Cosgrove pulled Lenore toward one of the deserted buildings—a boutique of some sort.

"Get out of there, Adams! Now!" Palmer took Gaultor by the arm and fled after Cosgrove. The Mhyrnian gave no resistance, watching after the fighters.

"Too late, Colonel." Adams' tranz was calm, fatalistic. "They've got a score of fighters hover-

ing outside, all around us. No chance to get away."

"Give us a visual," Palmer tranzed. A moment later the bridge of the ferryship appeared in his mind. Crew ran about, armed with depolarizers. There were several discharges heard from below. Smoke poured in from the ramp.

"I'm setting the ship on tranz-activated auto-destruct," Adams added quietly.

"Don't use it unless I say," Palmer's reply was emphatic.

More blasts intermingled with cries of pain—of death. Palmer found his mind replaying Evanna's death beneath the fallen girder once more. He struggled against the fresh horror of it, and of the death that now raged aboard the lame ferryship.

Crew on the bridge fired suddenly down the ramp way. Bolts of violet energy ripped back through their bodies. Palmer struggled against the rage that swelled up within him. It smothered beneath helplessness. There was nothing he could do to stop this.

"Hold," a booming voice echoed up into the bridge. Reluctantly, Adams tranzed a "cease fire." Almost immediately, smartly uniformed strike soldiers rushed into the control area. Their weapons efficiently stunned all remaining security and armed crew into unconsciousness. The boarders then moved into a circle about the control boards, standing at the ready, depolarizers leveled at Adams.

"This is it," Adams tranzed evenly.

"Don't do anything," Palmer tranzed.

"What's happening?" Lenore's voice was insistent. Quickly, Cosgrove recounted what had happened.

"Are they of my people?" Gaultor asked anxiously. "What color are their uniforms?"

"They're not Mhyrnian," Cosgrove replied quickly. "They wear black uniforms with a single, silver pin on their collars. I can't make out what's on the pins."

Not Mhyrnians! Palmer imagined them members of one of the major outlaw Combines. It seemed certain. So the hijacker had worked for them. He saw new movement at the entrance to the bridge.

The man that came in looked ridiculously muscled, as though half of his waking hours were spent in weightlifting. He wore braids on his uniform, and each hair of his head was capped with a silver bead. He shouldered a plasma mortar the way most men carried pistols. He smiled broadly as he looked around.

"We're secure," he announced proudly.

From behind him, a heavy woman with long, oily hair and hammy features waddled onto the bridge. She wore a gown made of metallic black weaves and had a heavy, silver amulet of a sculptured dragon on a chain around her neck. She surveyed the room, then pointed a thick finger at Adams. The finger had two large rings on it.

"He's the one, Kaskel. And he's tranzing even now."

Kaskel, the muscled commander, took several steps toward him.

"What do you want from us," Adams said.

"Nothing that we cannot gain now that we have you. Your help will merely make all of this easier."

"Tell us where you are hiding him," The woman's voice had a gurgle in it, and her breathing was audible in the slightest of whistles.

"Him?"

"The Mhyrnian shaman."

Palmer and Cosgrove turned to look at Gaultor quickly.

"Why do you think we brought you to Mhyrn?" the woman asked.

"We're refugees from Ahrgol. It just went to Hypermotility. What would we be doing with a Mhyrnian?"

"One of our operatives served among a group of Zorl followers there. He brought the ship here so that we could—talk—to a Most High Nobleman. You will produce him, and you will produce him now.

Adams hesitated. "We did have some followers of Zorl with us, but we evacuated them into the woods as soon as we landed."

"Then why are you tranzing all of this," the woman climbed heavily into the commander's seat behind him. She played with a curl of his hair then took a deep breath. "He's not on board, Kaskel."

Palmer turned to Gaultor. "You must hide, Gaultor. Leave us. Escape out of this city—return to your people."

"I will not desert you," Gaultor's answer had the sound of finality.

"Colonel," Cosgrove said. "I'm going to move ahead—see what the base may have to defend us."

Palmer nodded. "Gaultor, you must leave. You are in peril as long as you remain with us."

The huge woman took Adams by the chin and turned his face toward her. "You cannot hide him from us."

As Palmer watched, the dark of her eyes swelled until it was all there was. She looked as though she had no eyes.

Cosgrove cried out. He threw his helmet violently across the room and clenched his hands at his skull. Lenore rushed to investigate, but he fled out into the street. She ran after him.

Palmer tried to tranz him but found only a distinct hissing that rushed and echoed inside his head. Cosgrove's scream echoed among the buildings. Then there was silence.

"Where is the Mhyrnian?" the woman asked, her eyes still feral black. A dark suspicion came over Palmer—growing panic. Deliberately, he looked away from Gaultor.

Suddenly, a sharp probe lanced to the center of his skull, piercing then snaking within his head. There was a high screeching—his own voice. After tugging at his helmet, he threw it aside. He groped furiously at unreachable, slithering tentacles that churned brutally about within his mind. Laughter and sobs escaped all at once. His hands burned as if they were on fire. He ran about the room, senseless.

After agonizing moments, the probing ceased. Hovering at the threshold of pain, a single, intense pressure took Palmer's will and flattened it beneath unwavering power. It forced him to turn and gaze at Gaultor.

"We have him," the woman said. Abruptly, the visual Palmer had of the bridge through Adams' tranz disappeared. "He's at the Forbidden City." She went on. "Inform Goren that we will shortly obtain him." Her tranzed voice bloated in pride. "Yes!"

Palmer struggled for breath beneath the suffocating pressure of her hold upon him. He fought that control and saw instead, behind her black eyes, the flaming countenance of a dark dragon.

He tried to warn Gaultor that they were coming. Instead, he merely gazed at the Mhyrnian. He could not blink. The woman's control would not allow it, as though, in that split second that the eyes are closed, Gaultor might vanish.

Cosgrove was back. His depolarizer hummed with life—set for stun and aimed squarely at Gaultor. Lenore was trying to restrain him, but to no avail. His determination was nearly superhuman. It was as though Lenore was not even there.

"Watch the Mhyrnian," the woman commanded, and Palmer's obsession became one of restraining Gaultor.

"Sit down," Palmer heard the woman and Cosgrove say simultaneously. "We come for you."

Gaultor looked from Palmer to Cosgrove, then back to Palmer. "What has beguiled you?"

He walked forward, gazing into Palmer's stinging eyes. Cosgrove's weapon traced Gaultor's steps.

"It is no use," the woman spoke to the Mhyrnian through Palmer's voice. "Stay where you are. We will not harm you."

From outside, the sounds of KRAS fighters began filtering down the streets. Lenore ran to the door, gazing into the night.

"The fighters . . . they're all over the place," she said breathlessly.

The flash of a hundred suns burst upon the night. Crying out in pain, Lenore clutched at her eyes. "I can't see! I'm blind! God, no . . . please, no."

The ripping sound of the megaton blast echoed and re-echoed among the towers of the city.

Lenore groped toward Gaultor. Her face was sunburned. Her eyes clamped shut. Profuse tear stains covered her cheeks. "Gaultor?" She stumbled, falling on her face. The Mhyrnian went quickly to her, kneeling beside her.

"Your ship is no more," the Combine woman's tranz was quiet—confident. Palmer's outrage battered futilely against the control the obese woman held upon him. Outside, the blinding white dimmed to brilliant yellows, then down to dimming reds. The shuddering rumble, felt through the ground, confirmed the grim fury of the ferryship's death. At last, it too abated. The woman's tranz returned, intoning the suggestion of apology. "I am sorry. You live, now, only until we have the shaman." The edge of remorse vanished. "Do not let him go."

Palmer struggled against the pain of the brilliant light that had nearly burned his eyes. He struggled against the woman, summoning up the Kyrellian disciplines, but to no avail.

A part of his mind remained detached through all of this. That part of Palmer found himself marveling at the woman's incredible strength and how she had found them. How could she see Gaultor through his eyes—his very eyes? How had she so effortlessly ordered him to retain the Mhyrnian?

"I see through your biotranz," she replied through his tranz. There was boundless pride in her answer. Her vanity surpassed any Palmer had ever encountered. "I dominate you through your biotranz, dear." Her tranzed voice rose in pitch. "This power is but one of the Black Arts. I, among all that reside in the galaxy, am highest of its masters. None can resist me—none."

You are a Mestrate?

"Perceptive," her tranz gurgled a puffy quality, as if slipped between thin lips. "It helps, but it is mastery of the Black Arts that exalts me to the greatest of all." She harbored no compunction about revealing the secret of her abilities. "Why should I have any?" Her thought answered his. "There is no power that can match those which I command."

That detached part of Palmer's mind recognized the implications of such a revelation with a sickening fear.

"That's right," she tranzed, almost kindly. "But don't worry about death just yet. All you should worry about is keeping the Mhyrnian in view."

"Isn't there something you can do?" Lenore's voice caught in despair. Her shoulders trembled in silence. Her voice dropped to a choked whisper edged in tears. "Dear God, please help us."

Gaultor gazed down upon her for a moment, then at Cosgrove, and finally at Palmer. Then, silently, he knelt. His head bowed in the dim light. The sweepings of light-synced scanner beams probed the city outside. Lenore turned her face to the doorway, listening intently. Fear claimed her expression. Equal fear must have gripped them all, but could find no expression.

Palmer stared wide-eyed at Gaultor, his eyes smarting from not blinking and burning from the intensity of the flash that had taken Lenore's sight. He struggled once more against the power of the Combine woman's control and once more, he failed.

He wished he could say goodbye to Arrleen and tell her he loved her. His vision blurred as moisture gathered in his eyes.

Abruptly, Gaultor stood. "No," his voice trembled. "This shall not be." Slowly, he raised his hands, one before Palmer's face and the other before Cosgrove's. "Now, I but warn you, Evil one. Withdraw. Withdraw, lest the power of Zorl destroy you."

The woman tranzed an incredulous chuckle. It squeaked in unison from both Palmer and Cosgrove's throat, and the grip of her tyranny on them tightened into searing pain. They staggered under it, shoved to their knees like dolls beneath a punishing hand. The faintest of cries escaped Palmer's lips.

The character of Gaultor's voice fell low and resolute. Even through his anguish, Palmer could discern undertones of outrage. "I command you to depart."

Sparkling points of golden light danced before the Mhyrnian's fingertips. There were thousands of them. A curious hesitation lurched back from the Combine woman. It stuttered through confusion, then blossomed into fear.

An image returned to his mind's eye, from what source Palmer could not guess. He saw the woman's face once more and beheld, beyond her squinting eyes, the effigy of a dragon coiling in dripping, black convolutions. It peered past Palmer and recoiled in terror. The last glimpse Palmer ever had of the woman was a fleeting image of her head caving in.

He was free. They were free.

Palmer nearly sprang to his feet. His head throbbed from pain and his eyes were blurred. Cosgrove swung his weapon away from Gaultor and ran dizzily to the door, but Gaultor knelt beside Lenore again. Gently removing her helmet, he caressed her head as a father would his child's.

"Still only fighters outside, Colonel. There must be fifty of them, at least." Cosgrove pulled back inside the door. "What's all this about?"

"I don't know for sure." Palmer turned back to Gaultor, who ministered to Lenore's blindness. In a relief rooted somewhere between joy and amazement, Palmer realized that Gaultor had, once again, saved all their lives. What kind of power had the Mhyrnian leveled against the Combine woman? Quickly, he tried tranzing toward the ferryship on the slight chance that someone had survived its destruction. The only reply was utter silence, and then a suspicion dawned on him. He tried tranzing Cosgrove, but there was no reply.

"Cogs, try your tranz."

Cosgrove hesitated, then looked at Palmer. "Did you hear me?"

Palmer shook his head. Whatever Gaultor had done to save them must have disabled their biotranzes. "We'll have to use helmet intercoms."

Cosgrove nodded then, turning, went to Lenore, kneeling beside her as Gaultor gently touched her eyelids. Cosgrove saw her condition as if for the first time. "This is bad . . ." he whis-

pered.

Outside, the whine of troop transports echoed down the streets, but no one moved.

"Colonel," he spoke softly. "Her condition . . . this really . . . this is really bad."

Palmer nodded, then replied "We'll make do."

"Light . . ." Lenore spoke quietly, trembling. They all looked at her. "I see light!" She squinted up into Gaultor's face, eyes puffy in the dimness, but open. Cosgrove gently lifted her face.

"Frank," her voice wavered. "I can . . . I see again." She turned back to Gaultor, but it was Cosgrove who looked at the Mhyrnian with new eyes. They helped Lenore to her feet. Gaultor looked suddenly tired and weak.

The transport whines grew louder. They were closing on them. For all Palmer knew, the Combine woman might have been able to triangulate their position using their biotranzes. He would assume as much.

"We've got to go. Let's see if there's anything at base we can use." Palmer called up his helmet's virtual keyboard. It appeared as if in the air before him. He opened the city's military computer network. "Good! We've got two battle-ready, two-seater ELITE class fighters still at the base." Quickly, he typed a status inquiry on the vessels. Streaming readouts on the inside of his visor confirmed his desperate hope that the fighters were in prime condition: P-Q-I enabled, fueled and armed with a full compliment of ordinance. He silently offered a prayer of thanks to the thoroughness of Fed Comm's regulations. The fighters waited for them, ready for use, even after nearly half a century of dormancy.

"Surrender the Mhyrnian," a voice barked in rolling echoes along the steeped rows of towers lining the street outside the boutique.

Palmer ventured a careful look. A hover transport cruised above the pavement perhaps a quarter kilometer away. Its search scanners swept the buildings may times per second. Soldiers flew overhead on speeders. Others advanced in queues on foot, their depolarizers set for stun. Palmer shook his head. They must really want Gaultor alive. Quickly, he set his own depolarizer on lethal, typed his visor into enhanced mode, and locked his weapon's targeting onto eye tracking crosshairs. His weapon began to hum, floating away from his hand. He tested it. Wherever he looked, it followed. Normally, he would have locked the firing mechanism to his tranz. Now, he tied it to a palm-sized disk he took from his pack. All he would have to do is squeeze it to fire.

For a moment he thought back upon the battle he had fought on the ferryship. How he wished he could have used this system against the hijacker, but then all the lockers had been fused shut. Since then, the crew of the ferryship had managed to work them free.

KRAS fighters roared overhead. A battle cruiser drifted into view. Its weapon blisters shone a deep purple.

"I wish we had some air support," Cosgrove said under his breath. "How can we escape this?"

Palmer wondered that too. Their only hope was to get to the fighters. Once on board, they might be able to reach space. They could head out of the plane of the ecliptic into free space where, he hoped, the Titan class battle cruiser might be searching for them. Failing that, they could surely escape Mhyrn's system using P-Q-I.

"How far to the base?"

"Ten kilometers—roughly," Cosgrove's voice was hopeless. "How do we start?"

"Gaultor, are these streets the only way around the city?"

The Mhyrnian thought for a moment. "Sometimes there are delivery corridors behind busi-

nesses. As a child, I used to play in some of them."

"I'll go look," Cosgrove ran to the back of the boutique. Like Palmer's, his weapon hovered close to him in the air. Palmer looked outside again. A depolarizer discharge nearly stung his ear.

"They've found us!" Palmer hissed. He rushed Gaultor and Lenore to the rear of the store. The whine of the hover transport fell to silence amid the sound of running feet outside. "Cogs," he used the helmet transmitter. "Any luck?"

There was no reply.

Palmer pushed Lenore and Gaultor back behind a doorway. He found himself holding his breath as he crouched on the floor, just high enough so he could see over the counter. His depolarizer floated above him.

The sound of footsteps stopped, making the silence that followed ring in Palmer's ears. Did they really know they were here, or were they just shooting at anything that moved? Light poured in through the doorway, and still there was no movement.

Where was Cosgrove? Palmer did not dare glance away from the entrance. A nervous sweat began to prickle over him. His hands were cold and his fingertips tingled ever-so-slightly at the triggering disk.

Movement.

Seeing the inhibitor grenade fly through the doorway, Palmer instinctively fired at it. It vanished in a puff of brilliant violet.

More silence—more stillness. Palmer went into the Kyrellian battle mode. Immediately, his senses sharpened to an almost biting sensitivity. He picked up subtle motions from the street and gauged that there were two men just beyond the threshold, one on either side. His eyes focused on the edges of the door.

The man in the doorway fired his depolarizer in a broad sweep. Before the beam came anywhere near, Palmer fired, taking him in a blinding hissing of vaporizing matter.

Where was Cosgrove?

Palmer barely saw the salvo of inhibitor grenades that flew through the door before taking them with his weapon. Only one of them made it through his barrage. It clacked on the floor and burst, blossoming into a vortex of gasses that immediately began to dissipate.

Soldiers rushed the doorway. Palmer fired rapidly, his hand all but crushing the trigger disk in his grip. It held in the rapid-fire position. He watched for a break in the flood of soldiers pouring through the entrance. They fired their depolarizers everywhere.

Shining violet touched Palmer's depolarizer. It popped smoke and smacked to the floor, dead. Palmer jumped and rolled backward through the rear doorway, forcing it closed just ahead of a new gas plume, set aglow by crossing depolarizer beams.

"This way!" Cosgrove appeared from the shadows and pulled them down a darkened hallway to a reinforced metal service entrance. The door Palmer had closed only moments earlier blasted inward amid smoke and spraying sparks. Two soldiers sprinted down the hallway after them. Cosgrove turned and vaporized them. Quickly, he slammed the metal service door closed behind him, sealed its lock, and fused the edges to the frame. It would be several minutes before it could be cut through.

The group looked quickly about them. This must have been but one of many delivery tunnels that extended outward from the core of the city, like the spokes of a great wheel. Operable portastrobes lit the concourse in a stubborn patchwork of light and dark. Several hover-cars stood off to the side, theirs doors open as if abandoned in a panic.

"Check the cars," Palmer called. "I'll look at these over here."

Sounds of hissing came from the fused door to the boutique. A fountain of sparks traveled slowly around the edge of the doorway. They were coming sooner than he had expected.

"Cogs," Palmer pulled his pack forward. "This one looks pretty good. See if you can get it running. Gaultor, Lenore—start running toward the center of the city. We'll try to fire up the car and pick you up. In case we can't do it, we'll hold them here as best we can. I want you two to have a good start. Now go!"

They obeyed, running quickly down the tunnel.

"Come on," Cosgrove hissed, sweating over the dash of the car.

Palmer took several grenades from his pack and set them for remote detonation. He attached the trigger disk he had used for his now defunct depolarizer tightly to his wrist, strapping one edge to his finger so that under no circumstances would he drop it.

The spray of sparks had traced nearly half way around. Side-stepping the acrid fountain, Palmer attached a grenade on either side of the doorframe. He hid more beneath each of the derelict cars, then a row of explosives perhaps twenty meters down the corridor.

"Come on!" Cosgrove took his helmet off and swung under the dash.

Palmer glanced down the concourse. Lenore and Gaultor were perhaps two blocks away by now.

The hissing of the sparks stopped. The door began creaking. Palmer ran and jumped into the car beside Cosgrove.

"I can't get it started!"

The door clanged onto the pavement and a handful of inhibitor grenades flew through the opening. They blew. The expanding gas cloud spread quickly. Palmer felt sleepy. He lost his balance, but recovered. Cosgrove hesitated.

"Go, go!" Palmer hissed. The gas stung his eyes for a moment, then deepened his drowsiness.

Two soldiers rushed through the doorway. They fired their weapons at the car. It shook and rocked against the impacts. Palmer fought against a blossoming desire to give up. He selected the two grenades beside the door and blew them. The blast rang. It echoed up and back along the distant expanse of the tunnel. The concussion rocked the hover-car and shrapnel spattered everywhere, taking the soldiers in its wake.

Palmer looked back at the doorway with sleepy eyes. The entrance was a pile of fallen girders and smoldering panels. Smoke and dust filled the air. But arms pushed and pulled at the obstacles, struggling to move them aside.

Palmer's sleepiness cleared. The gas must have dissipated by the explosion.

The hover-car came to tentative life. Cosgrove sat up, facing the controls.

"Let's move!"

The car shot forward. The smoky service entrance to the boutique fell away behind them. Palmer fired the grenades beneath the cars. The resulting explosions spun and tumbled the flaming fuselages all about the concourse.

Cosgrove slowed the car to a stop. Palmer all but yanked Lenore inside and Gaultor hurried after. It was only then that Palmer felt the blood trickling down the side of his head. A growing pain emerged from just above the warm trickle. He looked up and saw the gaping tear in the roof of the car. His helmet, just beyond the source of pain, was hot to the touch.

Once Gaultor and Lenore were inside, Cosgrove opened the thrusters and Palmer fired the last group of grenades. A wall of explosions erupted across the full width of the tunnel. The cascad-

ing rumble opened up floors and structures from above, and the hallway collapsed amidst swirling wildfires.

"What's that up ahead?" Lenore said urgently.

Squads of soldiers poured onto the road ahead of them. They wore the same black uniforms he had seen tranzed from the bridge of the ferryship. They spread out across the tunnel, taking up strategic positions and bringing their weapons into targeting position. A mobile, tactical platform drifted into view from an intersection farther down the thoroughfare. It positioned itself directly in the center. Its twin weapon turrets extended into full firing position and began to glow violet.

Cosgrove slowed the car.

"No," Palmer growled. "Open her up. They want Gaultor. We have to rely on them using care in stopping us. Our best tactic is boldness."

The car accelerated again. Palmer knew that hand depolarizers could do nothing against the platform, so he never even considered using Cosgrove's still-hovering hand weapon.

"What about ballistics?" Cosgrove swung his pack over toward Palmer. Of course! They could use smart grenades. Palmer took several of the self-propelled explosives and set them for impact detonation. He fumbled at the targeting devices, but finally tied them into the cross-hair network of his helmet. The targets flickered in his visor, an apparent result of damage to his helmet.

He opened the side door and went into the Kyrellian stance without consciously realizing he had done so.

The soldiers opened fire.

Violet discharges hit all around Palmer. One struck his arm, numbing it instantly. He dropped the grenade he had held in that hand. It fell out the door, blossoming into a white-hot maelstrom that rocked the car. They blurred past the soldiers. Palmer tossed another grenade. It began on its own in mid-air. Quickly, he turned to look at the platform, training the crosshairs on the command bubble. The targets flickered and drifted. He threw five more grenades in rapid succession. Each of them launched in mid-throw, arcing around to home on the target.

The platform's twin violet blisters fired on the car.

The full effect of the stun was only partially diminished by the structure of the hover-car. Cosgrove slumped against the dash, and the car began veering wildly.

The ballistic grenades hit their mark. The platform exploded in a fierce vortex of white flames. Spinning out of control, the hover-car plunged through the fiery curtain. It screeched from scraping metal-to-metal against the left wall of the tunnel. The skidding impact flung Palmer free of the vehicle, throwing him into the air. As the car spun and recoiled against the walls, Palmer saw Cosgrove barely regain control of it. He brought it to a halt some fifty meters down the way.

Palmer struggled against the growing feeling of sleepiness. He was badly bruised. and the throbbing he felt every time he moved only increased his desire to give into slumber.

From back down the tunnel, soldiers began moving around the blazing wreckage of the platform. Palmer took a grenade and groggily fumbled at its settings. What did those numbers on these silvery ovoids mean? He struggled against a heavy coma that seemed to batter his head like soft, warm pillows. It made his vision shift about in little arcs, as if he were slowly turning.

A violet beam glanced his helmet. Palmer shuddered. He closed his eyes and fell backward. Hitting the pavement barely stirred him again. He held the grenade over him, his arms tired to the brink of exhaustion.

"Ballistic," he said in the midst of a yawn. Now was that seventeen or nineteen? He decided on seventeen and propped himself up on his arms, looking at the soldiers. He gave the grenade a

spastic toss. It veered away, taking up speed. He struggled to keep his eyes on the center man. The crosshairs fuzzed and blurred. He blinked his eyes and forced them open.

Dazzling violet!

Darkness crashed down over him, disturbed only distantly by the sound of an explosion.

A slumber – sleep so deep that there seemed no bottom to it. Falling. Gently turning—head over feet. Up? Down?

A timeless interval.

Voices.

"He's coming around."

Palmer felt a pressure on his arm. Suddenly, his head cleared.

A terrible thud, a deep rhythmic pulse, shook everything about him. He tried sitting up, but the pain nearly overcame him.

"You're badly bruised, but no broken bones or internal injuries."

Lenore straightened up from crouching over him. The room was bathed in reds—emergency lighting. Gaultor stood, looking out a doorway.

"What happened? Where's Cosgrove?"

"Trying to activate the fighters. That grenade you tossed killed the last of those soldiers. It gave us enough time to get in here."

"The base?"

She nodded. "We're safe for the moment. Frank's been trying to get the base computer to free up the fighters, but his security clearance isn't high enough. I've been working on you for an hour. That last stun you took was a direct hit in the face. I'll give you some pain killers if you like."

Palmer nodded. She took another ampoule from Cosgrove's pack and held it next to Palmer's arm. Immediately, the pain washed away, hovering, only barely, beneath the point of perception.

"Can you come?" she asked urgently, and Palmer climbed to his feet. Though he felt no pain, he still staggered a bit. He went toward the door where Gaultor stood.

The chamber beyond was a massive hanger complex. It was nearly empty, obviously abandoned in haste. There were no vessels anywhere to be seen, only gutted crates and supply packs. Cosgrove worked at a computer terminal near the center of the hanger just below a large, cylindrical structure that seemed to protrude from the ceiling, high overhead.

From nearly behind them, the rhythmic thudding became almost deafening.

"They're persistent," Lenore said wryly. Palmer smiled back at her and went quickly to Cosgrove.

"Martin—you're all right! I can't get this fool thing to give us access. It knows the base is under attack, but it won't open up."

Palmer slid into place before the console. He typed in his security code and full base menus poured across the screen. He scanned them and selected the one, labeled SECURITY. A moment later, the screen flashed green, and then darkened.

From above, a rumbling hum echoed and cascaded throughout the hanger. The massive cylinder descended, and the distant ceiling began to open slowly like an iris.

Beyond was a partially clouded, cool, dark green sky, only barely tinged with the warm colors of dawn. Battleships hovered there, their weapon blisters glowing angrily against the few stars that remained in the sky. A formation of KRAS fighters tore across the newly revealed heavens. It was strange. The ships made no move toward them. Was it possible that no one noticed what was happening below?

The cylinder opened like a blossom, revealing two silver, ELITE class fighters. Each bore the Governor's seal. So, these were to serve for emergency escape by the Federation Governor. No wonder they were in prime condition and P-Q-I enabled. Briefly, Palmer wondered why the Governor hadn't used them when RoseStar had been besieged.

The fighters were mounted in a vertical stance, poised to leap skyward. The double-seat canopies opened. Small motors whirred as a powerful rumble began climbing toward a whine. Four boarding disks glowed to life before the group.

"Let's go," Palmer stepped onto to one of them. It immediately began to rise toward the canopy of one of the fighters. Cosgrove, Lenore and Gaultor followed him, each on one of the other disks.

He reached the canopy and climbed into the forward command seat. Had his tranz been working, Palmer would already have the vessel synchronized to him, its every function a mere extension of his body. He strapped himself in and fired up the crash fields. He reached automatically to remove his helmet and found that it was gone. Lenore must have removed it while trying to revive him. No matter. He took the fighter's control helmet from storage and strapped it on.

The ship's manual controls glowed immediately to life. He typed in a test program on all the ship's weaponry. A moment later, the fighter's computer screen flashed an all-green readout on the full compliment of the fighter's ordinance. Palmer scanned the list. It was impressive. These two fighters had the capacity to destroying battleships, whole squadrons of fighters—even raze cities. It was overkill for fighters of this class. Yet, for this once, he was grateful for the boundless paranoia funded by limitless resources. It just might make it possible for them to escape into space.

"Colonel," Cosgrove commed. "We've got P-Q-I sub-boosters and plus-optical afterburners. P.O.A.'s! Can you believe it?! All we have to do is make orbit and we can cut in the afterburners. We'll shoot so far ahead of those KRAS' we'll be well clear of the solar system before they even notice we're gone. Then we can jump to hyperspace."

Palmer felt a thrill of relief. Plus-optical afterburners! They were so expensive that virtually no one used them but the super-rich of RoseStar.

A launch, straight up at maximum acceleration, seemed to be all they needed. To stay and fight would be suicide. They must use their wits, and perhaps all their weapons, to escape the armada that waited beyond RoseStar.

Behind him, Gaultor climbed into the unfamiliar rear seat. The area was a bit small for the Mhyrnian, whose head pushed against the rear of the canopy ceiling. Once he had strapped in, Palmer locked his crash field and began closing the canopy.

The whine of the fighters' engines grew to a deafening roar as the canopy descended.

Suddenly, from below, there was a blinding flash. The trailing explosion drowned out the roar of the fighters. Palmer looked down to see soldiers pouring into the hanger, firing their depolarizers at the ships.

Palmer opened the Glassteel blister above them. The battleship and fighters were gathering. Apparently, some one had finally noticed. Palmer set the release mechanisms for broad-blast smart mines. The screen had printed out exact altitudes for every vessel, and Palmer set barrages to explode at those heights. He started the fighter, slowly spinning. Its blaster ports flared as he fired a starburst of depolarizer beams. Explosions blossomed everywhere, above and below. Cosgrove, monitoring Palmer's vessel, followed suit.

"Full acceleration," Palmer said quietly, punching on the inertia shields. "On my mark."

The blister was fully open and the battleship opened fire. Its blisters disgorged profuse pulses

of violet energy. The fighters rocked and recoiled under the assault.

"Three . . . two . . . one . . . mark!"

The city fell away—a dizzying blur. Flashes of light erupted from below. Palmer ventured a glance backward. A flaming battleship tumbled against the dome of RoseStar. It detonated hard, cracking into massive sections. The fighters that had clustered above the hanger spun wildly away in all directions like fragments of prematurely-blown fireworks.

A blaring beeping yanked Palmer's attention back to the computer screen. The shields were gone. Never mind, they had protected them from the battleship's first barrage as they had prepared to launch.

The horizon of Mhyrn stretched into a curve. The sun bathed the vessels in rose brilliance. The atmosphere collected along the edge of the world, a sea green that darkened into blacks, broken only by the formations of distant clouds.

They were mere minutes away from hyperspace. Cosgrove's fighter turned in a barrel roll—an urge Palmer only barely resisted. They were going home.

Before them was rescue. Palmer would arrange for a covert expedition to pick up the survivors of the ferryship. Then he would see Arrleen, rest from the horrors of Hypermotility for a time, and enjoy a long overdue leave. Smiling wide, Palmer looked back at Gaultor.

But the Mhyrnian gazed back upon his home world, perplexed.

"What is it," Palmer asked.

Gaultor shook his head slowly. "I cannot leave."

"What!?"

"We cannot leave—you and I."

The two-minute alarm sounded—two minutes from safe engagement of the afterburners.

"I don't understand."

"We are The Ones. We must be."

"The Ones?"

"Salvation lies behind us, Martin—not ahead. If we escape now, the fate of the whole universe is sealed. It is ruin."

An alarm sounded. Palmer looked back at the screens. A squadron of KRAS fighters was closing fast.

"What do you mean, Gaultor?"

"We are the ones Zorl has chosen to save the universe. We must return."

Palmer shook his head. The fighters were visible specs against the darkness. Two battleships rose behind them, moving just beyond blaster range.

One minute.

Palmer looked at their course projection. They would have to open the afterburners early to escape. Yet he hesitated.

"Colonel . . ."

"I know," he paused for just a moment. "Cogs, I want you to go on ahead. I . . . I don't know that I can follow."

Silence from Cosgrove.

There was an explosion nearby.

"Go, on—hurry!"

Palmer pulled back on the control stick. The fighter arched around in a tight loop, plunging back toward Mhyrn. He glanced back to see Cosgrove's fighter leap out of sight, as if they had just

disappeared.

"Good," Palmer thought. "God speed."

Explosions blossomed all around the Palmer and Gaultor. Ahead of them—back toward Mhyrn—the long-range scanners showed a growing congregation of warships, hundreds of them.

"Where do we go," Palmer said calmly—incredulous that he was doing this.

"To Markeeome—or as close as you can get to it."

Palmer set the computer pilot to take them there directly, then turned his attention to the weapons systems.

A KRAS fighter screamed past them, dangerously close. It discharged a volley of blasts. The fighter shuddered violently and smoke filled the canopy. Palmer stubbed emergency purge, his eyes burning. What protection could he call up now? Then, an idea occurred to him. He quickly set the fighter's entire compliment of sensor-blind to track the ship, spinning about it so rapidly that they would form a series of rings at differing distances. The rings themselves would then process so quickly that the protection they afforded would be like having shields again. Once set, he deployed them and started them spinning. They moved outward, one to a thousand-meter radius, the second to two thousand, and the third to three thousand, tracking the fighter's course as though they remained a part of it. Each ring was made up twenty-odd ballistics, equally-spaced from its neighbor.

Palmer watched as a KRAS ship approached on intercept. It exploded in a fiery smudge as it crossed the outer bubble.

Fans had cleared the smoke out of the canopy by this time. Warning lights glared from all over the panel and alarms rasped loudly. Palmer shut them off. The ship shivered and jostled, just barely under control.

The other fighters pulled back. Stumped? Good. Every moment was precious. It afforded him a moment's rest—a time when he might think for just an instant.

What was he doing? Why go back to Mhyrn on the word of a primitive shaman? And then Palmer remembered Gaultor's rescue from the hijacker. He recalled vividly the silver glories of Markeeome. Perhaps the reality of these incredible events fueled his return. Perhaps the answer to the driving obsession that had consumed much of Palmer's life did wait back on Mhyrn, even at Markeeome. Perhaps there he might somehow find the answers to Hypermotility. Perhaps he could even help to stop the horrors that had taken the lives of his parents and those of countless billions. In any event, he would try. He must!

Ahead, the curved limb of the planet grew flat. The sky of greens expanded overhead as they descended into the atmosphere. A row of battleships lay before the falling fighter. They fired on him. Their blasters were still set on stun for the outer bubble of ballistics exploded violently, having absorbed all the energy—but not quite. As Palmer reflected upon the firepower that could have been leveled against them, a sudden realization came to him.

Apparently, these outlaw combines knew something about Gaultor's powers that he did not, for they wanted him so badly that they had allowed the death of hundreds of their highly trained operatives in order to insure his safe capture. It was power they were after. So now Palmer knew it was right to protect Gaultor—even return him to Mhyrn at his request.

Gaultor did, in fact, command powers. Palmer had seen the Mhyrnian release him and Cosgrove from the tranz grasp of the outlaw Combine woman. He had restored Lenore's sight. Add to that the incident above Markeeome. Gaultor had seen, or at least known of, its "lights" when Palmer had seen them. Markeeome's glories hinted at tremendous power, perhaps even a metaphys-

ical power—incomprehensible, even miraculous in its behavior. And wasn't that what was needed in these days of Hypermotility's irresistible strength—miracles? Palmer nodded, then looked back at the Mhyrnian for a moment. He saw there in his eyes the look of a child—innocent and yet somehow wise.

"I'll do everything I can, Gaultor."

KRAS fighters began to fall into formation about the ship, apparently trying to force its course. Two of them erupted as they crossed the second bubble of ballistics. Miraculously, the course Palmer had set held.

Ahead, the skies about Markeeome were heavily overcast. Lightning played within the billowing storms. He nosed the fighter down through the tops of the thunderheads. The fighter shuddered amidst the turbulence of the clouds until it finally dropped beneath them. Rain spattered loudly against the canopy.

Suddenly, a sweeper dropped in front of the fighter. A moment later, both ballistics bubbles sprayed outward from the ship and ten KRAS fighters closed quickly into tight formation. So, they figured it out.

Violet energy flashed at them from somewhere. New warning lights blinked on. Palmer scanned them rapidly and saw that even the crash shields that surrounded both him and Gaultor were unstable. Gaultor's fire protection frequencies were completely gone.

"I'm going to try to ease down carefully," he said to Gaultor. "The crash shields should protect us. But there is no protection for you against fire."

Gaultor's reply was quiet—emotionless. "Do not concern yourself. I have my own protection against fire."

Palmer triggered a final defensive tactic—a sweeping volley of depolarizer discharges. But nothing happened. The weapons systems must have gone in one of the many hits the fighter had taken. Palmer scanned the weapons directory for anything that might still be working. The screen scrolled by quickly. Everywhere he looked he saw flashing reds—all except for one system. It was the exterior crash absorber shields. They still shone a wonderful green. Palmer had an idea.

Glancing to the sides, Palmer discovered the KRAS fighters close enough to see the pilots.

"Whatever you do to protect yourself against fire—now is the time to do it," Palmer yelled against the rocking and shuddering of the fighter. "I'm taking us down!"

Markeeome was directly ahead, misty beneath the heavy rain. Palmer rechecked the personnel crash shields. They still held. He began to throttle back, lowering to treetop level. The KRAS fighters shadowed him. They could afford to. They had him now.

Or so they thought.

Quickly, he entered new shield parameters into the ship's computer, waiting until just the right moment to implement them.

The airspeed had fallen to below a hundred kilometers per hour. Palmer saw the KRAS fighters lower their landing gear. He shook his head a little. If what he had planned worked, they would never use them. Still, he wanted them to think he was finally giving up and lowered his own gear.

Fifty kilometers per hour—thirty, twenty, ten. The ship hovered finally, as did the KRAS escort. They were just above a foothill, standing beneath the towering majesty of Markeeome. Hundreds of black fighters converged upon them. Battleships dropped through the clouds and transports hovered behind them. How many such ships were there?

"Get ready," Palmer said to Gaultor.

He waited. One of the pilots was gesturing, pointing downward. Palmer nodded once, then

punched the computer's enable button.

The escort of KRAS fighters flung wildly aside, struggling to maintain equilibrium. A moment later, they exploded. The combined blasts consumed the ELITE fighter. It erupted in its own fiery death.

Palmer fell through the flames. Above him—just slightly above him, he saw Gaultor's body, flaming like a falling star. For that brief moment, a terrible grief tore at him. Palmer hit the ground. The jar knocked him unconscious.

Thunder. Explosions. Flashes of golden radiance.

Palmer opened his eyes. Gaultor stood before him, his body all but lost in the flames of an intense golden fire that spun and blossomed about him. His hands were raised high above his head and his fingertips blazed with a white brilliance that hurt to look upon.

From the pinnacle of Markeeome's peak far above them, flashes of incredible golden power lashed at fleeing ships—coherent splendors that spun a mixture of lightning and solar prominence. Wherever they touched, battleships flared into spinning maelstroms of destruction; KRAS fighters lurched wildly out of control, caught in webs of scintillating golden energies. Moments later they would erupt in flaming detonations.

Gaultor looked down at Palmer as the last of the terrified ships disintegrated in fiery, golden death. The cyclonic energies that surrounded him spread to include Palmer.

"Now I have a knowledge, Martin. We are The Ones."

End of Book One

Leave a message about this story.

Read a preview of Book Two

Procyx
Chronicle of the End Star of Grief
Book Two: The Works of Man
by O.R. Savage

PROLOGUE
The Artifacts

"It's not nearly enough!" the customs woman hissed. "Not for what you're trying to smuggle."

Standing beneath an air condition vent, Coss wiped the perspiration from his bald head with a damp cloth. The room boiled over with Federation colonists desperate to find passage off the war-torn world. Coss searched over his shoulder for any of the natives. At the moment, none of the Mhyrnians with their high foreheads and violet tinged skin were anywhere in sight. Federation troops clustered everywhere. Some were bandaged. *Bandages*, Coss thought. It was *that* bad that even the soldiers had to wear bandages while their wounds healed, and without the rejuv radiation, that could take weeks or months.

"Well?" the woman asked.

"How much more do you want?"

"Ten thousand for me and ten thousand for the contact on Modelk."

"What?!"

"Quiet! You want to attract attention?" the woman took a sip of her drink. It was a local brew that used an alcohol imitator that relaxed and invigorated without intoxicating. It was also highly addicting. The woman closed her eyes for a moment, relishing the rush. She smiled. "I wouldn't even be trying this if I weren't on *my* way out in a couple of days."

"Twenty thousand . . . I can't possibly come up with that kind of money!"

The woman shrugged and glanced at one of the Federation soldiers nearby. "Then you won't get past the gate. They're watching for smuggled pluridium, and what you've got could buy a world, no?"

Coss wiped his forehead again. Twenty thousand new credits. He did have it, but he would need every one to make it back. He shook his head slowly.

The woman studied him with narrowed eyes. At last she took a final swig and reached for her bag. "Be seeing you. Good luck . . ."

"Wait," Coss grabbed at her forearm. She smiled and sat down, waiting. Coss opened his parcel and took out his credit voucher.

"I want it in cash—no trail to link you and me and my comrade on Modelk."

Coss flushed with anger.

"There's a trader just down the concourse," the woman stood.

They moved through the throng. The din of crying children and babies was so loud that general announcements were swallowed up in it. Evacuees were desperate, angry, shouting while offi-

cials and spaceport employees moved about their business calmly and took bribes openly. Coincidentally, it seemed there were never any Federation soldiers watching when the money changed hands. They probably got a kickback.

Coss wiped his forehead again. Conditions among Federation settlements were near anarchy. Following the massacre at Tartris, the Mhyrnians had declared a "Holy War" on the Federationist infidels. Coss could hardly blame them. Vigilantes had murdered every religious leader they could find in the holy capitol. But it was not that alone that had galvanized Mhyrn. Women and children had been slaughtered along with their men in the horrific bloodbath. It was the final blow. The Federation had been bleeding the world of its ultra-rare pluridium for centuries while the poverty-stricken natives lived on in a virtual Bronze Age, and no one cared.

Smoke plumes from burning colonies spread across the horizon. The spaceport was jammed. Only RoseStar, the capitol of Federation interests, persisted in smug arrogance beyond the reach of the Mhyrnians. Apparently, some of the city fathers had long ago foreseen this day, for they had encased RoseStar in a massive bubble of triple polarized Glassteel. The cost had been ridiculously absurd—prohibitive many times over on any other world. But here it had been built, and it could resist multiple, point-blank anti-matter detonations before even *beginning* to weaken. RoseStar had become the city fortress—impregnable and inviolate.

Even after all that had happened across the planet, the investors holding up inside RoseStar were not about to leave. They had typically made trillions a day in profits from pluridium mining. They would just wait. It seemed that besides building the dome as a shield, the governors of RoseStar had also made preparations to withstand a centuries-long siege. They could wait—go on about their cavalier lives until the Federation warships arrived to set things right. No, the money *would* flow once more.

Today's newscasts reported an army of native warriors gathering at the base of domed city. Coss shook his head. What could spears do against triple polarized Glassteel?

So many of Coss' colleagues were dead. His deep grief churned within a black fear that bordered on terror. It made him constantly ill. He had never dreamed such things could ever engulf *him*. Research astro-anthrolopology was a safe profession—wasn't it?

A man jostled him, rushing past. Coss nearly dropped his bags. He clutched the one that held the artifacts, hyperventilating from his unshakeable panic. He clamped his eyes shut for a moment, trying to calm down.

"Hurry. I have to be back at my post in ten minutes."

Coss nodded, swallowing hard. In the last two days he had done things he would have shuddered to imagine not a year earlier.

The trader was confused. At first the machine said it had no cash. Coss tried again. This time it required a retinal scan to release such a high volume. It took three tries before the machine admitted a match. Moments later the cash appeared at the slot. The woman grabbed at it but Coss beat her to it.

"I w . . . w . . . want to make sure I make it through." Coss' voice was trembling. "I'll give you five now and your contact the other fifteen when she clears me and I'm safely away from the spaceport."

"We've been over this before . . ."

"Fine. I'll just find another customs clerk. There . . . there . . . there's no regulation anymore. Everyone's taking bribes all over the place. And you can bet next time I won't be so discreet in sharing what it is I'm trying to g . . . g . . . get off world."

"I see." The woman laughed once. "Very well. I agree."

She took the five thousand.

"Good. How will I know her?" Coss stuffed the rest of the money inside his coat. "How will she know me?"

"Give customs this," she handed him a card. "It's coded with an academic courier flag. My friend is assigned to special cases, so she'll be sure to get you." She twitched her eyebrow. "See you at customs." Before he could answer, she disappeared into the throng.

Coss moved back against the wall, breathing hard—unable to catch his breath. Circling sparkles cluttered his vision. He thought again about turning the artifacts in—but to whom? The objects were invaluable, and not because of their monetary worth. These were unique relics of some super civilization, long forgotten—*machines*, even, from a time far past when the ancestors of these Bronze-Aged Mhyrnians might have ruled the galaxy. If he had translated the hieroglyphs correctly, these artifacts promised answers to the crisis that faced a thousand million worlds: Hypermotility—the terrible stellar catastrophes many felt linked to the astronomical anomaly called Procyx.

Centuries ago, a brilliant star-like object had appeared near the edge of the galaxy. It had shone only coherent light and in only one frequency—pure blue. It had dazzled the scientists of that time and they had tried to study it, but with no spectrum or absorption lines, it had proven impossible. Then, less than a year after its appearance, worlds began to die in a frenzied death that was later named Hypermotility. Space probes sent to study the phenomena had perished in similar demise. The conclusion drawn was that Procyx caused Hypermotility, which caused the death of worlds. Since that time, countless star systems had fallen to Hypermotility and Procyx had grown larger and ever more brilliant. No measurable link could be proven that Procyx was responsible. Nevertheless, perhaps by default alone, Procyx had been blamed, and no end was in sight. Followed to its obvious conclusion, Hypermotility would eventually ruin the entire galaxy—perhaps, even, the entire universe.

But what had drawn Coss' attention was the fact that Procyx had been prophesied eons earlier by Mhyrnian shamans. It was called the *Eye of the Procyx* or the *End Star of Grief*. Casually interested in the coincidence, off-world media had picked up on the name and called it just *Procyx*. The name had stuck.

The Mhyrnian prophecies claimed that Procyx was the "Eye of Echion, the Terrible," demon god of Mhyrn who, though in captivity, could stare out upon the cosmos at the end of all things. The touch of his glance could bring death to worlds—perhaps all worlds, or so the prophecy went. The destructions of Procyx would continue, unstoppable, unless the energies of Zorl, a god of great benevolence and irresistible power, sealed up the cosmos against the deadly view of this Terrible One. The prophecy claimed that nothing but the Powers of Zorl could work against the Procyx—nothing!

Coss resisted the urge to look at the artifacts—to make sure they were still inside his bag, that no one had stolen them since he had last checked. If he could just get them safely off world until he could make contact with the right Mhyrnians, perhaps *they* could use them to unleash these *Powers of Zorl*, whatever they were and if there was such a thing, and stop the ruination of the End Star of Grief.

But who might the *right Mhyrnians* be? Coss had some ideas, but without further research he could not be sure. His plan was to leave until things quieted down and then quietly return and discover whom best to give them to.

A sudden roar outside rattled the windows of the terminal. Coss stumbled to the clear wall.

Two squadrons of fully-armed Federation fighters ripped the air in tight formation, heading east toward RoseStar. Around Coss, the momentary lull in conversations caused by the flyover erupted anew, doubled in volume and urgency. People were clamoring, now.

He pushed through them, rude and rough. He had learned to ignore people's outbursts. He shoved his way toward the customs line. There were only three people ahead of him. He tried to make eye contact with the agent he had bribed, but she skillfully avoided him.

The time scraped by with painful slowness.

At last Coss hefted his bags on the counter before the woman.

"Anything to claim?" she asked, bored.

"Nothing," Coss replied, his voice thick. He cleared his throat and wiped his forehead again with his handkerchief.

"Go on through," She didn't even look at his bags.

He took a deep breath that deteriorated into a nervous cough. Taking a hard swallow he moved on into the main concourse. Things were somewhat calmer there. This was the place for the privileged—the ones who had paid their bribes and assured their way to safety. Some people were even snoozing in chairs, waiting for their liner to arrive. Coss went over to an empty seat next to a sleeping evacuee and carefully put his bags down. Again he fought the urge to check the artifacts. Instead he slid down in his seat, at least trying to look relaxed.

This business had been so awful—dismal. He hated the memory of nearly everything he had done over the last few days. It festered in him until he forced himself to stop. No! Better not get into that too deeply, at least not until he had the artifacts safe. He forced himself to close his eyes, feigning sleep. It took several minutes for him to calm his breathing down to something that looked relaxed to a casual observer.

"Excuse me, sir." The voice, while soft, shocked Coss so violently that he jumped. He opened his eyes and squinted at two Federation security men standing in front of him. One of them had his hand on the butt of his depolarizer. Coss swallowed hard and it caught in his throat. He coughed and hacked for nearly a minute before he could talk. His eyes were watering so badly he could hardly see the men's faces.

"We didn't mean to startle you. Please remain calm and come with us."

"I . . . I . . . is something wrong?" Coss asked, while one of the men helped him to his feet. The other man picked up his bags.

"Wow, what have you got in here? Feels like rocks."

"My work," Coss tried to say with a calm voice. "I . . . I study metals. But please, I've been cleared through customs. I haven't . . ."

"Just come this way, sir."

Coss resigned himself to his fate. In a way he felt relieved. Let somebody else try to save the universe. This was just too hard.

They moved down a dark hallway and into a spare office—the kind businesses keep for temporaries. There was a desk and chair, with a second chair opposite it. The two men ushered Coss and his bags inside, then closed the door. He could hear their footsteps stuttering away down the hall. After perhaps a minute he entertained the thought of getting up and leaving. He started to when he heard more footsteps. He quickly moved back to his seat and waited. A moment later the door opened.

Coss caught his breath. It was a Mhyrnian. The tall native walked silently into the room and sat in the chair behind the desk. From the red robes he wore, Coss recognized him as a shaman to

one of the priesthoods. He wasn't sure which and inwardly cursed himself for not having paid better attention to such things during the seven years he had lived there. The shaman said nothing. He went directly to the bag that held the artifacts and opened it.

Outside, the roar of another squadron of Federation fighters grumbled up through the building. The shaman seemed not to notice them as he reached in and brought out the stone.

It was about twice the size of a man's hand and made of igneous rock. The shaman turned it over and looked at it from all angles, then placed it on the table. He reached in again and took out the sphere. It was made of solid pluridium and glinted like lavender-tinted chromium. Its surface was engraved with symbols and hieroglyphs. The Mhyrnian cupped it in both hands and silently bowed his head. For nearly a minute he held the sphere in reverence, his head bowed. At the end he placed it carefully on the table next to the rock.

After a time he turned his violet eyes on Coss.

"You are taking these off world?" his voice was rich and his diction utterly free of Mhyrnian accent. Coss hesitated. To answer yes was admitting to a felony. To deny it would be a joke. He decided to say nothing.

"Please," the Mhyrnian said after the pause grew too long. "I must know what you planned to do with these objects."

"It . . . it doesn't' much matter now, one way or the other," Coss said carefully.

"But it does. The orb—I can understand why you would wish to smuggle out. But why this worthless rock? There is no law against removing igneous rock from Mhyrn. Why the risks and the bribes?"

Coss shook his head.

"Could it be because of this?" the shaman stood up. He closed his eyes in concentration for a moment and then sang and held a single note. It was a tone Coss knew well: "A" above middle "C." After a few seconds, the rock jittered on the table, then lifted into the air as if it were a feather. It turned on its end and hovered steadily for nearly a minute before returning softly, smoothly to the tabletop, exactly where it had been placed. The shaman waited for Coss to reply.

He shrugged finally, like a schoolboy caught in the act. All was lost.

"Where were you planning to take these? You need not fear. I . . . we plan no prosecution. Your work among this people is known. You have treated with respect those things that are sacred to us. I can only assume that you mean well with what you plan for these objects. Is that not so?"

"I am afraid for their safety, yes."

"Why?" The shaman asked, sitting back in his seat.

"These are perilous times. I . . . I do not want them to fall into the hands of those who do not understand their worth."

"Such as?"

"Such as Federationists who care only about their commercial value. The orb alone is worth trillions in new credits."

"And the stone? Who would guess at its secret unless he happened to sing, as I did, the sacred tone that sets it forth?"

"The two must stay together. That I know."

"Yes. It is imperative that they stay together, and that they be here on Mhyrn when the time is right. Without them, all is lost. But I suspect you understand some of that already. Do I speak correctly?"

"I know that they must come to the right people. That they are Mhyrnian in origin suggests

that they must remain here, yes. But I have feared for them, so I was going to take them off world until I could find out to whom they should go."

The Mhyrnian sat silently for a time.

"I don't understand," Coss said. "The men who detained me are . . . are Federationists. Do they work for you?"

"They work for the most money. Here and now, we of Mhyrn have the most money. Do not worry. Your secret remains. But I need to know what you planned for these objects."

"I have a friend in Perseus, on Modelk—a former student of mine who has studied things that are kin to what *I* have studied, though if you asked him he probably wouldn't see how they relate, as yet. I hope to tell him—if I have time. He is absolutely trustworthy. I plan to leave these with him, then return here to find those to whom these artifacts rightfully belong. I would not return until things have settled down enough for me to move about freely and discreetly. I am determined to see these objects safely to their rightful owners."

"What is your friend to do while you are finding the owners? Anything besides keep the objects safe?"

"I hope he will study them from the vantage point of his own expertise. If what I suspect about them is true, these objects have much to do in a specific way—a way that would shock both Federationist and Mhyrnian alike if the truth were known. For safety sake, I wish to say nothing more than this. May I assume you are concerned for their safety as well?"

"You may, brother."

"Who *are* you?"

"My name is Ambylor. You will not see me any more after today, and our conference here must remain a secret.

"I have counsel for you. Proceed with your plan. Take the sacred objects to your friend. He will, indeed, guard them carefully. But do not return here yourself."

"Why? I must find to whom they belong!"

"You must trust me on this. Do not return here. There are potent and devious evils yet hidden on Mhyrn that would take these and use them for far darker purposes than the death of worlds. Such would hesitate at nothing to obtain the information you hold. By the time you had discovered their true nature, it would be too late."

"But I know the answer is here! Surely, *you* must know it!"

"Do not return here. Promise me."

Coss said nothing.

"You *are* determined to return," Ambylor said quietly. "Is this not so?"

"People die from the Eye of the Procyx—each day—they die by the millions! I cannot allow that if the means to halt it is within my grasp!"

"Yes! But all must be done in its season, my brother. I grieve for the multitudes that have perished, truly, but *all* will be lost if matters proceed *out* of their season. I repeat, and I do so strongly: DO NOT RETURN TO MHYRN."

Coss settled back in his seat. He looked down at his clasped hands, the damp handkerchief caught between them. "I promise I will not bring the artifacts back until I know for sure. Beyond that, I cannot wait any longer."

The Mhyrnian sat back and the two men regarded each other. At last Ambylor stood.

"How can I convey this to you? I, too, have limits on what I can reveal. I honor you for your valor and respect the cause of your urgency, but you *must not come back*." He paused, studying Coss'

face. After a moment he looked down. "Nevertheless, I pray to the Creator that your way will be kept safe." He looked up again. "You are free to go. I will see to it that you are protected until aboard your starship. Beware at every step until you reach your friend. Once he has the sacred objects, they will be safe from those dark forces that would seek to usurp their power—at least for a season."

"Thank you," Coss stood. He reached his hand out and the Mhyrnian took it. They shook firmly.

"I know you are a Most High Nobleman," Coss said, putting the artifacts back in his bag. "But I do not recognize which priesthood . . ."

"Zorl," Ambylor said. "And remember to tell no one of this meeting. Not one."

Coss nodded and left the room. At the end of the hall the two security men that had brought him fell in behind him and stayed near by until he boarded the starship bound for Modelk.

The great liner lifted off and drifted across the mountains in its slow climb. Coss gazed out the window at the falling landscape. He would miss Mhyrn's jade-green skies, the breezes at night, fragrant and punctuated with glowing, flying things . . . and the work—the digs left, half finished. What marvels were there left buried that he would never find if he *didn't* come back?

Dusk. Procyx, the deadly "Eye of Echion" glared with searing blue above the eastern horizon. It was beautiful in its coherent purity. Below, in the valley, Coss could see RoseStar. It's bubble flashed reflections from Procyx, like a jewel set among the deep greens of the surrounding rainforest.

What was that? Coss strained to see. Tiny bursts of energy flashed at the base of the city's great blister, dwindling in the shadows of the growing night. Fighting? Coss presumed so. Lights winked on in the city-fortress, boasting their elegance, indifferent to the desperate drama that raged just beyond the limits of their impregnable dome. More Federation fighters cut across the ascent of the liner, pealing in toward the fierce assault that roiled at the edge of the city. They opened fire, raining death on the assailing multitudes below.

Coss pulled away, eyes clamped tight, struggling against the revulsion that clamped at his throat.

Think of something else, he thought. *Anything!*

His mind drifted for a moment, then settled on the events of the day. He opened his eyes again, looking at nothing in particular—the ceiling.

What had happened to him back at the terminal? The Most High Nobleman had sent him on when, by all rights, he should have claimed the artifacts without further discussion? Why?

He remembered how he had found the artifacts, one morning, on the ground outside his tent. It had been dawn and a storm had been brewing in the west. He had thought it especially odd that a tuning fork accompany them, since Mhyrnian technology had never developed tuning forks. Laboring beneath a strange compulsion to keep his discovery a secret, Coss had casually inquired among the workers if they had found anything unusual the night before. No one had found anything. That night, after another average day at the digs, Coss had sat brooding over the objects. Curious, he had struck the fork and seen the stone rise into the air as it had done when Ambylor had sung the identical note back at the terminal.

Wait a minute. Ambylor! The shaman had called himself Ambylor. Coss knew that name! The familiarity of it had struck him even at the terminal, but he had been too nervous to think into it much.

Ambylor was the name of that Most High Nobleman who had died centuries earlier, a martyr

to Zorl. Coss knew the history and claims of the religion well. Since his death, this first Ambylor had been canonized *The Resolute*.

A troubling notion began to take root within Coss.

Surely many shamans had been given the Martyr's name as an honored remembrance. There were probably hundreds of shamans named "Ambylor." Coss shook his head, disbelieving. "No." *Ambylor, The Resolute* was dead. His martyrdom was centuries past. It couldn't be.

Relief swept over him, but it was premature. Hadn't all the shamans been murdered at Tartris? Correct. There were no survivors. Yet there remained still another disturbing coincidence.

Subsequent research had revealed to Coss the probable identity of the relics left at his tent door. Just before his death, *Ambylor, The Resolute* had gone to a shrine in search of the very artifacts Coss was smuggling off world. He swallowed hard on a dry throat. How could he have missed *this* connection? Moreover, scriptures, written after the appearance of Procyx, claimed that beyond death, the Martyr now served the Creator as guardian of the sacred relics. They further prophesied that *Ambylor, The Resolute* himself would restore the sacred objects when the season of their power dawned.

"No, no, no, no," Coss muttered. "What are you thinking?!"

A chill bristled the hairs on the back of his neck. He had to know more! He *would* deliver the artifacts to his former student, Clement Reeber, as Ambylor had approved, but then, he *must* come back here and find the shaman again! How could he not?

The ceiling lit up as if the sun had suddenly leapt back up above the horizon. Coss sat forward and looked back out the window. Below, at the base of RoseStar, a great, brilliant pillar of fire twisted in the twilight. It breached the dome in a blinding golden radiance that was somewhere between fire and lightning. There was a hush aboard the liner. The vortex of glory unraveled into blinding tentacles that sought and found the Federation fighters. At the touch of the golden death, the ships spun wildly to the ground, detonating in violent explosions. Coss strained to see what was happening at the point of the breach. Throngs poured into the city amid the violet flashes of depolarizers. Meanwhile the turbulent, golden energy yanked more fighters from the sky.

The voice of Ambylor spoke softly to him from behind. "DO NOT RETURN TO MHYRN." Shocked, Coss turned to see the Mhyrnian, but found only the faces of other passengers, frozen in horror-tinged awe at the death of the immortal city—its dome breached by a people that had no weapons capable of even scratching it.

After a time, the falling city disappeared in the distance. Breathing dizzily and in quiet, quick gasps born of desperation, Benjamin Coss clutched the bag with the artifacts closer to him.

Look for Book Two of Procyx in future issues of Deep Magic...

Leave a message about this story.

Continued from page 30

sleeping nearby.

"Right flank! Thealos!" Allavin shouted out, dropping another soldier with an arrow to the man's throat.

"Got them!" Thealos shouted, swallowing to keep from vomiting. He gripped the riser of his hunting bow and drew another bodkin arrow back, sighting a Bandit commander's mail shirt before letting it fly. He reached for another arrow and dropped the other soldier with a solid shot to the leg. The man stumbled and cursed, grabbing the shaft that crippled him.

"You Shaden bastard!" a Bandit yelled from behind him, and Thealos whirled, using the bow to block the sword thrust. Before he could grab at his blade, Thealos watched Flent score the man across the back, sending him crashing into the churn of Shoreland mud. The Drugaen nodded for him to follow, and Thealos pressed behind him into the camp.

The alarm went up like wildfire as they ran. All around them, the soldiers were waking, emerging from tents and hurrying to fix their hauberks in place. It was madness. And if that wasn't enough, the reek of Forbidden magic was so strong he could barely think.

Sturnin Goff and Jaerod cleared the path ahead, their blades scything through the Bandit sentries who opposed them. Allavin held back with Justin and Tica, keeping a steady rain of arrows on whoever charged at their flanks.

Thealos gasped, staring at the dead Kiran Thall sprawled in the wake of the Sleepwalker and the knight. Command pavilions were coming alight with lanterns and torch-fire. Thealos wanted to look everywhere at once, but he couldn't. His courage wilted under the danger, and he felt like dropping his bow and sprinting with all his might.

"Come on," Flent said, tugging at Thealos' arm to keep him from losing the rest of the group. The Drugaen's face dripped with sweat. His hazel eyes narrowed as another rush of Bandits came at their rear. Swinging the axe up, he prepared for the fight.

Thealos felt a prickle of earth magic just before the ground turned into a stinking black morass and trapped the attackers. The Bandits let out startled yelps and sunk into it, and they were soon covered in black, tarry mud. Thealos glanced over his shoulder and saw Justin looking at the Bandits, his thin arms lowering.

"Quickly!" the Warder admonished, waving them after him. Naked fear blazed in his eyes.

Thealos and Flent caught up with the group. Thealos breathed the humid air in gulps, trying to quell the fear and nausea in his stomach. He had never witnessed the carnage of a battle before. The blood-spattered wretches writhing in the mud didn't hint at the glory and honor that had always been his perception of war. And he had never felt so abandoned or so alone, so at odds with the peace and tranquility of Avisahn. In all the hard business dealings in Dos-Aralon, he had felt the absence of the earth magic. The din of commotion always muted it. But the depressing blackness of thought and feeling that suffocated him was a hundredfold worse than anything he had experienced. Even the bitterness of the Krag they had faced was nothing compared to this. No, the Forbidden magic being used in the army was anathema to any Shae. And the wielder of that magic knew he was there — silent, thoughtful, and fully aware of his presence. A shiver of comfort ran through him, and he turned to see Jaerod behind him.

"We're almost through," Jaerod said, and the words brought Thealos back from the cliff of his fears. He could feel the man's presence tingling on the back of his neck. The Sleepwalker had doubled back, leaving Sturnin alone in front. Thealos glanced at each side of the camp, watching the trembling masses of men rise from their bedrolls, struggling to overcome the lethargy of sleep. They were too slow, too sick and disorganized to stop them. Jaerod's voice pitched low by his ear. "If

we're separated, go on to Landmoor. Let nothing stop you."

In the bowels of the camp, Thealos felt a presence stir – a whisper of magic that stung his nose and brought tears to his eyes. His knees buckled. He stopped and stared, blinking quickly, and tried to steady himself. The presence was unmistakable and chilling. Squinting in the darkness, he saw a single pavilion, separated from the rest. Thealos went cold to the bone.

"Keep moving!" the Sleepwalker ordered, rallying the group around him. "Close together now."

Thealos stood paralyzed.

"Come on, Thealos," Jaerod urged. "It is only fear. I will protect you."

"The Sorian," Thealos stammered, all blackness and chills.

"Yes, the Sorian," Jaerod replied. "The magic in Landmoor can stop this. Remember."

He listened to the Sleepwalker's voice and grasped onto his words. Fighting down the panic, he gripped his own blade's pommel for reassurance and followed Jaerod into the last row of pickets. Dead soldiers littered the ground.

"What now, Sleepwalker?" Sturnin demanded, mopping the sweat from his forehead. His mail shirt was cut in several places, showing glistening snags of chain. He had several nasty wounds. The breastplate was smeared in blood, giving the knight a menacing look in the dim light.

Allavin clutched an injury on his side and scanned the treeline. "Kiran Thall are roaming on the south bend. Ambushes everywhere. We should leave the road and strike into the woods. I can get us south around them. The road will be too dangerous now with their horsemen."

Jaerod nodded. "The Kiran Thall will follow us into the woods. Lead the way, Allavin."

Thealos felt a whisper of death in the air and froze again. He smelled the Forbidden magic even stronger. Justin shoved up his sleeves, revealing thin arms prickling with gooseflesh. The Warder Shae was as tense as a bowstring.

"It's here," Justin whispered with dread.

Out of the darkness of the wood before them came a shape sharing the colors of the night. Soft velvety robes swished and moved apart, revealing a woman holding a glowing orange orb. Her eyes were depthless and black and sent shoots of fright down to Thealos' toes. He couldn't breathe.

"Get behind me," Jaerod warned, moving before the band to face her. His tapered blade was up defensively, gleaming with a cool white light. He jerked his head to Allavin. "Take them, now!"

"Go!" Allavin barked, jerking Ticastasy by the arm and breaking off away from the main road and the two combatants. The Sorian and the Sleepwalker faced off in the reddish light of her orb.

For a moment, Thealos panicked. He didn't want to leave Jaerod alone, yet he felt helpless where he was.

Justin did not.

The Warder Shae stretched out his long thin arms and sent a blast of earth magic at the woman. Thealos inhaled the acrid smell of flame and cinders that brushed against his face as the light exploded on them. Heat and flames licked at her robes, but the orb flickered once and the fire guttered out, leaving nothing but haze.

"Go, Warder!" Jaerod ordered, advancing on her. "She is more than your match."

Justin's body tensed as he stared with hate at the Sorian. She stood still, studying Jaerod with an impish smile on her mouth. She wasn't interested in the Shae at all.

"Welcome to the Shoreland, Sleepwalker," she said in a teasing voice. "I've been waiting for you to come back."

Thealos covered his eyes as scarlet flames jumped from the orb and rushed at Jaerod in a

blast.

Again Justin intervened, bringing up his arms and sending a jolt of blue lightning at her. With a casual pass of her hand, the jagged arc deflected away, slamming into a huge cedar with a shattering crunch of splintered wood and ash.

"Go!" Jaerod ordered, swinging his tapered blade and slicing through the red curtains of flame. The polished edge cut through the magic, absorbing its heat and rush.

Thealos grabbed Justin's arm and pulled him away, darting into the forest after the others. The Shadows Wood swallowed them in its blackness, and Thealos had to slow down as the branches cut his face and hands. He cursed under his breath, struggling through juniper bushes and over mossy slopes. Justin lagged behind, panting for breath. The Warder Shae's robes were stained with mud and his eyes glittered with emotion.

"She is a Sorian," Justin huffed, pausing against the slope of a tree. "And the Sleepwalker will die."

"Don't say that!" Thealos gasped. "Jaerod knows how to protect himself."

Justin shook his head. "Sorians are immortal. She cannot die."

The feeling in Thealos' stomach deepened. He looked back the way they had come. The forest was dark, but the light from the Bandit camp was getting brighter. Already the sounds of pursuit could be heard. Their sprint had taken them far from Jaerod and the Sorian, but they had also lost the others in the darkness of the woods. He didn't have Flent's Drugaen vision to see well enough in the night. He rubbed his mouth, listening to the sound of the Kiran Thall whistles getting closer.

"Go with me to Avisahn," Justin said and then coughed. "We cannot face her without the Heir."

"And what about the others?" Thealos said, praying that Jaerod would emerge from the trees, following them. He clenched his fist. Don't leave me alone to do this, Jaerod. I need you!

"There is nothing they can do," Justin replied. "There is nothing any of us can do. We must go to Avisahn and warn the Heir. That is our duty. The duty we owe our people."

Thealos shook his head. "I don't believe that. Jaerod knew…"

"What could he know?" the Warder whispered. "He said it himself – they have fought and died against the Sorian. We need the Red Warriors here. We need the Silvan army. For the love of Shenalle, Thealos, you must believe in the Shae! If we die here, who will carry word of our failure?"

From the Bandit camp, a blinding white streak of lightning lit the night. Thunder shook the trees and dropped them both to the ground. The force of it caused dry needles to rain down throughout the woods.

"Sweet Vannier," Thealos gasped in shock, knowing by a sick feeling of sudden emptiness that Jaerod was gone. The thin prickle of gooseflesh that had followed him since Avisahn had winked out, abandoning him.

XXVI

Dujahn had encountered a Sleepwalker once before. When he was advising the City Duke of Trivaedi years before, one had entered the palace grounds and abducted the Duke's daughter. Dujahn was the only one who had seen the man dressed in the darkest black walking the halls at night with unselfconscious ease. His heart had stopped for fear and he did nothing, not even when he saw the Sleepwalker carrying the girl out over his shoulder, bound and trussed. He would have died. He knew it then as clearly as he knew how to breathe. If the Sleepwalker knew he had been seen, Dujahn would have been killed. He never told the City Duke of Trivaedi. He'd never told any man.

Dujahn kept to the trees, watching as Miestri faced the Sleepwalker with an air of indifference. She was the most powerful person Dujahn had ever met, but he knew the reputation of the Sleepwalkers better than most.

This one was a medium-sized human, but fast as a cat. The black clothes disguised his movements, helped him blend in with the shadows and smoke. He had a wicked-looking tapered sword and handled it like an expert swordsman. There was no denying the Sleepwalker's abilities. Dujahn didn't get a good look at his face – the hood prevented that – but he saw the style and graceful movements, like a bird gliding just over the ripples of a lake. Effortless. Graceful. Deadly.

The sword whipped around again, catching the tongues of red fire and snapping them off before the flames could touch him. The sword was Silvan. There was no doubt about that. The blade glowed white, as if hot from the constant blasts of the Sorian's power, but it stayed firm and hard. Tempered steel would have shattered by now.

Miestri smiled teasingly, advancing another two steps. The Sleepwalker didn't run from her, but he shifted his position, always keeping her in front of him.

She spoke something in Silvan, a taunt. Dujahn struggled with it, trying to translate. Do you know how many of your brothers have begged me for a quick death? They wept, Sleepwalker. They wept for it. The Sleepwalker said nothing, focusing on the blade, ready to move when she attacked him again.

He's good, Dujahn thought, clucking his tongue. A few Kiran Thall had gathered near him, keeping a safe distance. The camp was still reacting from the attackers, but the rest had gone into the forest. Dujahn had seen the two Shae slip away, but he had heard there were others. A knight, a woodsman, a Drugaen, and a woman. Strange company. Strange night.

A dazzling white flame jumped from the orb in Miestri's hand, catching the Sleepwalker in the middle. He grunted with pain and swept the blade down, shattering the magic with the sword. Smoke burned from his chest and Dujahn's eyes widened. Was he hit? He thought nothing could hit a Sleepwalker! He only saw the smoke drifting from the man's chest. But as the Sleepwalker turned again, pacing in a half-circle around Miestri, Dujahn saw the smoking amulet. It had absorbed the blow. It had a strange marking – a cross set in an octagon. It matched the symbol on the pommel of

his sword. Interesting…

"Must be the Sleepwalker from Castun," one of the Kiran Thall whispered. "Ban…"

"Killed Secrist's company, I heard," another muttered. "Sent the rest squealing like pups."

"Ssshhh!" Dujahn hissed, eyes intent on the battle in the edge of the woods.

The Sleepwalker and the Sorian faced off again. This time, Miestri bowed her head. Dujahn could feel the prick of magic in the air, the burnt smell of fire. The Sleepwalker tensed as red glaring flames exploded all around him. It came rushing at him from all sides like a sinkhole. The blast of heat and air singed Dujahn even at the distance and he covered his face.

"Sweet fury!"

From a cloudless night sky, a shaft of white lightning crackled down into the camp, swallowing everything in its dazzling glare. Thunder shook the trees, spilling pinecones and dead branches down. The clap knocked everyone to their knees.

Blinking quickly, Dujahn wondered in a panic if he were blind. He clenched his fists and stared at the ground until the white smear in front of his eyes cleared and he could see again. Looking up, he found Miestri standing alone, staring at a spot of scorched earth.

"She…she bloody killed him!" one of the Kiran Thall gasped.

Dujahn watched at her in disbelief. But something was wrong. There was no look of triumph on her face. She stared at the smoking earth, studying it with cool fury. Dujahn stepped away from the others and advanced. The grove had been burned clean, leaving ash and soot everywhere. Only a smoldering pile of ashes in the middle showed the Sleepwalker's last stand.

He stopped. A black sigil twice the size of a barrel lid scorched the earth where the Sleepwalker had stood. It was the same mark – an "X" set into an octagon. The air smelled sharp and sour.

Miestri sniffed at the wind and leaned forward, studying the mark. Dujahn scratched his head and watched her. Her smooth pale skin was soft in the dim firelight, and her eyes were thoughtful and intrigued. She prodded the black ash with the toe of her padded slipper. Closing her eyes, she inhaled a long deep breath through her nose. She opened her hand, revealing the orb. It gave off that strange reddish light that continued to haunt Dujahn. "Tell them to stand back," she told him. The colors in the orb began to weave and convulse.

Dujahn swallowed, taking a short step back. "Back!" he said in a sharp voice. "Get back!"

The soldiers who watched were already abandoning the grove like waters receding after a rock is dropped in a pond. Dujahn couldn't move. He stared at the sphere, drawn like a moth. The reddish light made the ground dim and hazy, like an early morning fog out at sea. Miestri's hand tightened about the sphere, the tendons in her hand growing hard.

In an instant, the Sleepwalker stood before them, gripping his blade furiously, swarming red flames all around him. Dujahn felt the heat of the flames, felt the magic rush through his body as it attacked the Sleepwalker. He tried to cough and scream, but the flames didn't burn. It was only an illusion. Miestri's eyes grew hard and intense. The images slowed as if in a stupor. The flames looked like jagged knives, the colors slow and torpid. Everything seemed to happen like a slow, steady breath. Dujahn blinked with wonderment. He was watching it all over again.

Just as the flames reached the Sleepwalker, there was a burst of light, blood red and horrible. Shielding his face, Dujahn struggled to see through the glow, and then he saw the Sleepwalker move. Gripping his medallion, he stepped through a tear in the lightning and was gone.

"Interesting," Miestri murmured.

The crimson hue vanished as she tucked the orb back within the folds of her robes. The magic

fire and lightning disappeared, swallowed by the sphere. Dujahn turned to her. She laughed softly at him. All of his training, all the diplomacy and composure he was taught was rendered mute by the Sorian. He gaped at her, seeing the orange light still flickering in her eyes.

"Did you drop your voice in a well?" she asked.

He nodded foolishly. She had reached into the past, twisted her fingers around it, and yanked it back to watch it again. It horrified him. "Who…who was that?"

"Only a Sleepwalker," she replied.

"And the others? Who were they?"

"One is a Knight of the Blade," she murmured. "The woodsman is from the Riven Wood."

"How do you know?"

She shook her head waved her finger. "Never doubt what I speak. Just believe. I've been in this valley for a long, long time."

"Yes, my Lady."

"The Shae," she mused, rubbing her lip. "You saw them, didn't you?" She stared past the wooden picket lines, oblivious to the masses of frightened soldiers watching her.

"You know them?" Dujahn demanded.

"One of them, yes," Miestri replied with pleasure. "But I did not think he would return so quickly."

Dujahn looked at her, confused. "The one who tried to hurt you?"

"Hurt me?" she laughed. "Really, Dujahn, you have no imagination at all. He cannot hurt me, for he is mine."

"Then who was the other Shae?" he blurted out.

"Obviously the key to the lock," she answered. "And I thought it would be Silverborne's little one." She laughed. "Oh, this is getting very interesting indeed. If only General Dairron were here to enjoy it, too. Come, Dujahn. We have work to do."

* * *

Dujahn coughed as he parted the tent flap. The room was full of officers wearing the black and gold of the Rebellion. He saw animosity on their faces, but he didn't care. The Sorian gave him authority. They might glare and they might posture, but her threat was enough to keep their swords in their sheaths. "Excuse me, Colonel Hallstoy – the Lady of Vale would like to see you. She has your orders."

Hallstoy looked at the officers surrounding him. Anger sparked and flashed in his eyes. Dispatch papers were littered on the only desk in the room and stacked in a heap on the floor. He had rosters and reports to prepare – knowing that his head was in jeopardy if he didn't come up with explanations and answers for Ballinaire. "Get out."

Dujahn stepped inside confidently. "Do we have to go through this again?"

The Colonel turned on Dujahn, his face red. "I don't like repeating myself, Dujahn! You tell Dairron's witch that I'll take no orders from her. I lead this camp when Tsyrke is gone. And if she doesn't like it, she can eat a warm bowl of trope!"

"Indeed," Miestri said, slipping through the tent flaps behind Dujahn. A chill went through the tent. "Do let it be horse trope, Colonel. Cow trope wouldn't fit in a bowl."

Hallstoy's eyes widened with shock. Scratching his balding scalp, Hallstoy spit on the floor and narrowed his gaze at her. "You have no authority in this camp, Miestri," he said. "Tsyrke is on

his way, and Mage with him. This is my command tent...."

Miestri lowered her cowl and her raven hair spilled out.

Hallstoy frowned, seeing her ivory smile. "Get out," he hissed. "Take your banned magic and get out of my tent. We've just been under attack, and I don't have time to be wasting on your whims, I don't care..."

"My, we are brave," Miestri said as she raised her fingers and closed them together. Hallstoy's voice trailed off into a squeak and his eyes glazed over with fear. He might talk and bluster, but she was in control – even over his voice. Dujahn shivered. She stared into Hallstoy's bloodshot eyes and flashed a wicked smile. A current of magic trembled in the air, and Dujahn stepped to the side. The other officers backed away from Hallstoy.

Hallstoy's face started to twitch. A look of horror and pain twisted his expression, but he couldn't speak. His hands flew to his face as rips and tears began splitting across his scalp and cheeks. Choking with agony, Hallstoy fled the tent, trying to keep the skin on his face. Several of the officers coughed, nearly gagging with disgust. No one stepped in to confront her.

"Officers," Miestri said gently, spreading out her hands. "You disappoint me. It only took seven to make you all into fools." Her mouth flashed a dangerous smile. There was something in the air, a tingling feeling that spread as she spoke. "Lord Ballinaire will be furious when the dispatch reaches him. Commander Phollen will be equally outraged. How could you let seven Inlanders humiliate you? These were Iniven farmers and Shaden with pruning hooks and straw arrows who defied the armies of the Rebellion!"

Dujahn swallowed, not daring to let the surprise show on his face. He watched the colonels cringe and twist with rage and anger. He stared at her in awe at how she used her powers to manipulate them.

"Could you not hear them laughing at you as they walked through your watch fires and posts? They were laughing at you!"

"There was a Sleepwalker…" one of them mumbled.

"Shut up, you fool!" another snapped, cutting him off.

"The greater disgrace," she hissed, her eyes glittering with feeling, "Is that you were taken so easily. Like children caught napping. I've seen General Dairron's brigade. I tell you that they would not have been surprised so easily." She shook her head, making her dark hair flutter. "If Commander Phollen were here, do you know what he would do? Do you know what Kiran Phollen would have done?"

As her voice rose in pitch, the tension in the room increased. Her magic swept through them, her voice instigating it, drawing in the soldiers like candles eating light from a single flame.

She sneered at them. "I remember the days of Kiran Phollen. His courage was fierce and his cunning quick. He'd repay this insult a thousand fold. He'd be a scourge to Dos-Aralon. How long has it been since Lord Ballinaire commanded us to be at war? How long will you stand here, begging for a leader who will act? If Commander Phollen were here, he would strike don Rion in the belly and twist his knife deeper."

There were grumblings of assent.

"You are not dogs tied to a stake," she said, her beauty and magic stealing into their eyes and hearts, razing the memory of Hallstoy or any obedience owed him. "No master stands over you with a stick. Rise and bite! The village to the north is weak. Destroy it! Landmoor is unprotected. Take it! If you are men of courage, then show it! If I were a general, I would not let this mockery go unpunished."

"What should we do, my Lady?" Colonel Davys shouted. Dujahn looked at him. He was taken with her. It showed on his face. He would have done anything for her.

"War," she declared. "Let it begin. Your soldiers are not sleepy — why make them rest? March tonight – this instant! Send the horses of the Kiran Thall to scourge and the soldiers to reinforce. Landmoor – she is ours!"

The Bandit officers started drawing up the new orders, their faces livid. They were barking out orders, calling on duty rosters. The Kiran Thall would go first, followed by the first ranks of soldiers. They wouldn't wait for dawn.

Dujahn watched the small smile twitch on her mouth.

* * *

Dujahn didn't like the Kiran Thall leader the moment he saw him. This one swaggered like a man with too much to drink, and by the mutton on his breath, he hadn't drunk in a while. The man's resemblance to his brother was tell-tale. Both Phollens had a dark brooding expression, but this one had a half-snarl on his mouth as well. Tsyrke Phollen was a head taller, though, and wore his grandfather's tattered red cape. Secrist Phollen was trim and lanky. But his eyes were desperate. Living in a brother's shadow could be a consuming itch.

Dawn crept into the Shadows Wood, showing a camp that was in the final stages of deployment. Most of the command pavilions were down and the wagon wheels churned the mud and manure into thick dark cakes.

"You ruined Hallstoy, Miestri," Secrist spat, pointing in the direction of the woods. "I don't think even a Zerite could heal that face. No man will ever follow him again. Not remembering him like that. Tsyrke's gonna be in a Fury when he sees what you're doing to his army..."

Miestri gave him a contented smile. "You do not have time to worry about him, Secrist. You have other matters that need your attention. There were two Shae involved in the attack on the camp. They are heading to Landmoor. You must stop them."

The Kiran Thall halted, his eyes narrowing. "How do you know?"

"Because I know what they are after."

"The Everoot?" he challenged.

She shook her head. "What they seek is in the city itself. Ballinaire has enough strength to protect the Everoot. And while this army is stumbling blindly in this swamp, the two Shae are hurrying south alone."

"If you did not already know this, you should," Secrist announced. "They have one of the best banned trackers in the valley with them. One of the wounded men saw him – swears it's Allavin Devers. Haven't had any luck hunting his band down yet."

She nodded. "Yes, but the Shae are no longer with him or the knight. They went by themselves."

"How do you know?"

"I know a great many things, Secrist Phollen. They are going to the tunnels beneath the city. They will enter through the shrine ruins. Down in the tunnels, there is a twisting maze at an archway supported by two stone gryphons. They must not enter that maze."

Secrist gave her a narrow look. "I could be killed for serving you."

The Sorian smiled knowingly. "But with this, you won't die," she replied, holding out her hand. A batch of the green moss quivered there. Dujahn watched the reaction on Secrist's face. He

stared at it desperately, a look of hunger so raw on his face that it was painful to watch.

The Kiran Thall wiped his mouth. His hand was trembling. "What do you want me to do?"

"One Shae is a Warder. He will deliver the other into your hands."

Secrist smirked. "How convenient."

Miestri nodded. "He has a weapon you desire, I think."

Secrist frowned and rubbed the stubble on his jaw. "What do you want me to do with him? Bring him back to you?"

"Kill him."

Secrist smiled. "What about the Sleepwalker?" He nodded to the Everoot. "If I have to face another one, I'll need more of that."

Miestri shook her head and reached into the folds of her robes. She withdrew a dagger with a copper hilt. A piece of leather wound around the grip. The blade was not any metal that Dujahn had ever seen. It had a grainy texture that looked like black sand. Had she poisoned it?

Miestri passed the dagger to Secrist, who studied the blade in the lamplight. He looked at her and raised his eyebrows. "Deathbane," she answered and watched the Kiran Thall grip it, mesmerized by the blade's dark texture. "If the blade so much as glances the skin – even a Sleepwalker would die. And no amount of Everoot will bring him back. Now go, Secrist. Use it against the Shae. Nothing can stop you."

A dark smirk crossed Secrist's face as her magic wove through him. He couldn't take his eyes from the dagger. "Where will you be after I've killed the Shaden?"

XXVII

Allavin Devers slouched against a cedar, resting a moment. He squeezed his yew bow, gritting his teeth. Anger and fear wrestled inside him. Only the Rebellion made him this angry. He was angry that a pig-headed knight rebelled all those years ago and caused so much suffering because of his ambition. And very few things in the valley frightened him anymore. Except the Sorian – the Witch of the Vale. He shook his head and steeled himself. The knight wasn't afraid. Those from Owen Draw had lived too long on the borders of the Kingshadow near the largest nest of Bandit regiments. They had learned to master their fear long ago. But he knew the magic of the Sorian would affect the Shae even more. Distant shouts whispered through the woods. He had come back to see why Thealos and Justin had not followed and discovered the Kiran Thall clotting the forest and following two sets of trails. He muttered an oath. The girl would be worried about Thealos. So would the Drugaen. Allavin had to admit it to himself. He was too.

Leaning away from the tree, Allavin quickly climbed the small rise, careful in every bootstep. Clearing the tracks as he went, he listened to the sounds of pursuit. The Kiran Thall were furious at being eluded, even though it was still the middle of the night. They had the advantage of horses and lanterns, but the Shadows Wood was thick and nearly impenetrable by horse in some points. Allavin knew enough tricks to shake the horsemen loose. But he wasn't confident either of the Shae did. He hoped Thealos was competent enough to elude the Kiran Thall. The difficult part would be crossing the lowlands to Landmoor without being seen. The edge of the forest was several miles from the city walls. And he had his suspicions that the Kiran Thall would be watching from the trees.

Grabbing a branch, he swung himself up and over a huge juniper bush and landed deftly. He glanced both ways, trying to pick out the path in the near blackness by touching the earth, letting his fingers read the signs instead of his eyes. Not much further to where he had left the others. The earth was mushy in spots, which he tried to avoid. Clearing tracks from mud was very difficult. But unless the Bandits did full circle sweeps every hundred paces, they wouldn't find his trail.

"It's Allavin." Flent's rough voice was distinctive in the darkness.

Allavin smiled. He'd forgotten about the Drugaen's sight. Bounding the last few steps up the steep rise, he joined the others in a small clearing surrounded by rock and crooked cedar high up the slope. A thin shaft of blue moonlight invaded the clearing, glinting dully off of the knight's armor.

"Where's Quickfellow?" Ticastasy asked.

Allavin settled down in a crouch, laying the bow across his lap.

"Captured?" the knight asked.

Allavin shook his head. "No. Not yet." He eyed each one of them. "I think she got the Sleepwalker though."

Stillness fell over the group.

"Are you sure?" Sturnin sounded skeptical.

Allavin shrugged. "I don't know enough about Sleepwalkers to be sure. But she called up this

red fire to surround him and then a flash of lightning from above…"

"We saw it," Ticastasy said, nodding.

Allavin shook his head. "But he knew that when he faced her. No, what I worry about more is the two Shae." The girl's eyes flared with worry. Allavin held up his hand. "I double backed to fetch them but they ran another way. You've got to understand something about the Shae. They can smell Forbidden magic at a hundred paces. The kind that she used – this Sorian woman – well, that's the most Forbidden kind there is. When I got back, the Kiran Thall were everywhere." He frowned, the memory of Tiryn's death still bitter in his soul. "When she came, it reminded me of our ambush here in the 'Wood. Like I was living it all over again. The same sounds, the same looks. I thought none of us would make it out."

The serving girl nodded and squeezed his arm. "Was that near here?"

Allavin gave her a level look and sighed. "Other side of the Iron Point Road. I came here because some Shae scouts were flying overhead on alerion for a routine visit to Avisahn and saw some sort of magic storm in the Shadows Wood not far from Landmoor."

"They flew a what?" Ticastasy asked

Sturnin answered. "They are like large birds, but their wings have scales that cut like knives. We call them Dragonshrikes in the Kingshadow, but the Shae named them alerion. They love sheep."

Allavin nodded in agreement. "You won't see them in the Shoreland because they hate the heat. They prefer the cliffs and the snows. The watchposts of Citadellian and Jove Stand breed them to serve as mounts. Beautiful creatures. Their plumage is like the fire of a candle."

Flent and Ticastasy both stared at him in wonder.

"The Shae fly the alerion to keep information traveling to Avisahn," Allavin continued. "As I was saying, the scouts I knew were going there, but they saw magic being done in the Shadows Wood. They saw a waterfall and wooded glen. The forests were swarming with Bandits. They'd never seen that much activity before and wondered at the source of the magic. That's when we found Ballinaire digging up the Everoot. That's when we were attacked. I thought it was a Sleepwalker, because I couldn't get a good look at it. The reputation – that's what I'm saying. But the thing that hunted us down killed all four Shae and would have killed me if I hadn't stumbled into quickmire."

Sturnin leaned forward. "I'm sorry about your Shae friends, Devers. But right now we're missing two of ours. Did you see where they went?"

"I saw where the Kiran Thall were hunting them, but if Thealos has any sense, he'll start cutting crossways to make the trail difficult to follow. My fear is that they might double back and try and find ours, and I don't think either is good enough to out-track these Bandits. The Kiran Thall will catch them pretty banned fast if they tried."

Sturnin seemed to agree. "Would they be smart enough to go on to Landmoor?"

Allavin rubbed his chin. He picked a twig out of his beard. "I think so."

The knight rose. "If the Sleepwalker's dead, then we only have one option left. You go after the two Shae. You've got to catch up with them before the Bandits do."

"There's a Bandit regiment in between us, looking for all six of us," Allavin reminded him, shaking his head.

"I heard about that time when you led a company of Bandits around in circles for three days, giving the knights enough time to get there. We hung the commander when we caught him." He chuckled gruffly. "If anyone can, Devers, it would be you."

Allavin grinned, embarrassed. "All right, it's not that hard. But finding two Shae in the middle of the night without getting caught by the bloody Shoreland regiment is not as easy as you'd think. I'll need help, Flent."

"Me?" the Drugaen spluttered.

"You saw me at thirty paces in the dark and I was trying not to be seen. Besides, I can't handle a company of Kiran Thall on my own."

"Then why don't we all go?" Ticastasy said. Her arms folded and her eyes flashed defiantly.

Sturnin shook his head. "No, lass. We need to warn the governor of Landmoor and ready the fortress for a siege. Jaerod thinks she will fall in a day. But I think we can hold her longer and maybe even muster a sally against these craven whoresons. You saw that army. They've got tide fever and dysentery. Hardly half would be fit to march." He looked at Ticastasy. "You're coming with me."

She shook her head. "You warn the city, then. I'll go with Flent."

Sturnin gave her a rock-hard expression. He wasn't about to be countermanded by a serving girl. "You do not want to be caught by a Bandit army in the middle of a war. You'd be serving more than Spider ale."

Her face went ashen. "Maybe you're right."

"Good, lass. We'll have our own troubles. But leaving you out here in the woods isn't a good idea either."

She shook her head. "No, I'd rather be in a city."

Sturnin smiled wryly. "A city under siege isn't much better, but we'll make it through this." He looked at Allavin. "If you find them, bring him to us in Landmoor."

Allavin rose. "There's a good inn on the north side of town. The Wee Kirke. Owner is Blain Kirke – he'll know me."

"Hopefully you paid him last time you were there," Sturnin said and rose, gripping Allavin's hand and giving him a hearty shake. "Good hunting, tracker."

"You be careful, Flent Shago," Ticastasy said, her eyes burning. She gave him a tight hug.

"I will," the Drugaen promised in a whisper. She squeezed him even harder.

"You'll always be my best friend," she said, giving him a light kiss on his bearded cheek.

He smiled and gave her a squeeze around the waist. Nodding to the knight, he hefted his Sheven-Ingen axe. "Meet you in Landmoor, Sturnin."

"Before you go," the knight said, pausing him. He held out his hand and motioned for the axe. Flent handed it to him, confused. "I saw you in the Bandit camp. You swing this like you're cutting down a tree, which is good if you're fighting trees. Leaves you vulnerable when it's too wide, see? Swing it down like this, high to low and low to high. That's how you kill a man with it." He smiled and gave the axe back to Flent.

"You sure about that?" Flent asked, turning the double-bladed axe over in his hands. He looked back up at the knight and winked.

* * *

Ticastasy tugged the cloak tighter for warmth. Her ankles throbbed from all the walking, but she kept up with the knight without complaining. He wasn't a talker, not the kind that she enjoyed at the Foxtale. No, he was the kind who sat in the corner, quietly ate his supper and drank his ale, and then went for a bed with nothing more than a grunt or two of acknowledgment. Dawn had greeted them several hours ago, yet they still could not see the sun past the steel-gray clouds over-

head. Fog swirled at the top of the trees, settling down over the Shadows Wood like a quilt.

Sturnin Goff reached the edge of the small embankment and stopped, peering through a thick curtain of scrub and pine. She walked up behind him, barely as tall as his shoulder.

"What is it?" she asked.

"The banned Valairus fog," he cursed. "Can't see Landmoor. But she's out there."

Ticastasy looked at the deep banks of thick clouds that had settled over the Shoreland moors. She heard bullfrogs croaking, the steady buzz of jupeflies, and even the whistle of swallows. There was definitely a creek or stream nearby, but the lapping waters were lost in the haze.

"And you were wondering how we would cross without being seen," she said. "The fog roams up here every night. Should have counted on that, Inlander."

"It's a blessing and a curse," the knight said. "If the Commander of the Shoreland regiment is half as clever as a grub, he'll march the army down in the early morning. He can get pretty close to the walls without anyone noticing. Come on, lass. Let's go."

Ticastasy followed him down the rugged slope, leaving the thick forest behind them. The marsh grass was soft and squishy beneath her boots and soon cakes of mud clumped on the heels. She paused to shake them off, but Sturnin kept marching. Walking in the mist was like getting little wet kisses on her face. They had to stay close to each other, for the fog swirled so thick in parts that neither could see past a few paces. She watched the dew collect on the tips of her hair and soon felt as if she had just emerged from a dripping bath. She wiped her face, surprised at how much moisture was there. Sturnin's armor looked absolutely frigid. Little streaks of watery blood trickled down the breastplate, making her shudder with disgust.

She thought about Quickfellow as she walked. She knew she shouldn't, that it would only make her worry more. Knowing that Flent was with the best woodsman in the entire realm helped lessen her anxiety for her friend. Allavin would keep him alive. But she couldn't help wondering where Thealos was. Were he and Justin crossing the mists at the same moment? Walking two hundred paces from each other and not knowing it? Wouldn't she be surprised if he emerged from the fog ahead of them. She wanted to laugh. Would he even care if she did…?

A thrush fluttered from the tall reeds ahead, flapping its wings and cooing after being startled. Ticastasy's heart thundered in her chest, but she calmed down, watching Sturnin Goff shake his head and mutter something. It had startled him too.

Suddenly, he stopped and planted his fists on his hips. She joined him and stared down the edge of a small rut into the icy waters of a creek. The waters were at least knee deep, and probably deeper in the middle.

"Wait," Sturnin advised and stepped down into the cold creek. He sank a little in the mud and then held out his hands. "Let me carry you across."

She stared down at the frigid waters and shivered in spite of herself. She didn't want to appear weak, though. "I can…I can make it," she said, nodding.

Sturnin gave her an amused smile. "The cold can hurt you faster than you'd think. I've seen men die of the cold after crossing rivers. Big men. Now come here."

Hesitantly, she lowered herself down and let the knight carry her. His armor was hard and biting, but she didn't fuss as he waded through the wide creek. On the other side, he boosted her up the embankment. Reaching down, she tried to help pull him up, but he was far too big and heavy to be much help. If she had been with Quickfellow instead, they probably would have crossed it and then shivered together. He certainly wasn't big enough to carry her across the creek. She smiled at the thought. Why was she thinking about him? He was too pale, too rich, and a stubborn Shae to

boot. But he had a charming smile – that was certainly in his favor. He was generous in a world that did not nurture generosity, especially among a people noted for their bartering and deceit. Yet he fit neither description very well. That intrigued her. It always had. Quickfellow was...unique. So different than Tsyrke.

The memories sparked to life again and she shivered with anguish. That was why she was thinking about Quickfellow so much. She had been trying to forget Tsyrke Phollen. Lies, all along. She had fallen in love with Tsyrke months ago – or who she thought he was. A rich sea merchant from Ilvaren who wanted to take her away. She was blinded by the gold coins, his roguish smile, and the possibilities of what it would be like to be called his wife. But then he had left and never returned, leaving her with a small pendant to whisper those promises in the dark. But they were lies! He was a Bandit commander. It was his army she had just crossed. She couldn't help but wonder if he had been there. She would never forgive a betrayal. Not one. She'd warned him of that. She was one man's woman – wouldn't share him with anyone else. Well, he'd had his chance. Now all she had left was Flent. And Quickfellow.

It felt like she had been walking for days when they finally reached the base of the hill leading to the city-fortress. The fog had receded a little, but the moisture clung to their skin and clothes. Ticastasy was exhausted. The traveling pack dug into her shoulders, and she was tempted to leave it behind in the rushes.

"We're almost there," Sturnin encouraged, following the base of the hill until they joined the Iron Point Road that wound its way up to the summit. Her legs groaned in protest, but she plodded forward, shaking the mud from her boots as they climbed the stone road up the side of the hill. Her breath came in quick gasps and the muscles in her calves knotted up.

"Are…are they going…to listen…to us?" she panted.

Sturnin nodded, his face drawn with fatigue. His pace never wavered. "When the Accords of Dos-Aralon were passed, the knights were given authority to command any garrison to defend the kingdom. We've had more training against the Bandits than most, so the Governor may just turn over command to me. He probably has a retired battle commander in the city for token duties," he added. "But we're facing a full regiment out there. He'll need experience."

Ticastasy nodded, wondering how Sturnin kept his breath after marching all night and all morning. She couldn't wait to reach the Wee Kirke and a hot, steaming bath.

The city rose out of the mist like a forest made of stone. The watchtowers loomed overhead, breaking up the even blue of the sky with stark gray lines and ridges. It was enormous, and she gasped in awe. Noises rose from the city proper, along with smells from a hundred places. Dumplings frying in tallow, smoke and cinders, stews and cheese vats, curing oils and dross. They were all welcoming smells to a girl who had spent her whole life in Sol.

The main gate lay open, but the portcullis was down, its huge timber frame blocking the way. Sturnin Goff advanced and greeted the gate captain on the other side.

"Well, sweet bleeding Achrolese," the man said in a thick Shoreland accent. His hair was trimmed down to the roots in the fashion of the south. "It's a bloody knight of Owen Draw. Take a look here, would you. By the druids, I can't believe my eyes."

"You're using the porter doors?" Sturnin asked. The captain nodded, and the knight nodded with relief. "Good. I need to speak to the garrison commander. Send for him."

"Will do, sir," the gate captain said cheerfully. "Hey Hollom, open the porter door. Got a knight here. Hurry up, now! I don't have the banned key, I gave it to you this morning." He gave Ticastasy a low bow. "Sorry, your queenship. We'll have it open in a moment."

The porter door lock clicked open and they were met by some of the garrison wearing the colors of Dos-Aralon.

"You're the first word we've had from the north in a long spell," the gate captain stammered, shaking Sturnin's hand. "I've sent for the garrison commander. You want to speak with the governor, too? Do you need to stay at the barracks?" The gate captain's men crowded around to get a good look at Sturnin and the huge sword strapped across his back.

"No, I'll stay in town. But send a man with her to the Wee Kirke if you would," the knight replied, nodding towards Ticastasy. "She hasn't slept all night. Go on, lass, I'll join you later." Then ignoring her completely, he turned to the gate captain and started hammering out his requests. "I'd like to see your stockyard and armory. Then you can show me the battlements and the cisterns. We need to start carrying in water right away."

The gate captain motioned for a soldier and spoke to him in a near-whisper. The escort nodded and offered to take Ticastasy to the inn. She followed, but something wasn't right. The gate captain looked nervous and kept glancing back at the barracks. Frowning, she followed her escort away from the knight. She scanned each of the sentries, trying to figure out what was wrong. As they passed the heavy battlement walls and entered Landmoor, she passed by the window of the barracks. She glanced a second time, just to be sure.

Standing in the window was a Bandit officer wearing black and gold.

XXVIII

Blain Kirke sliced into the hot roast goose with his knife and burned his fingers as he stripped a piece of the salty meat away. He savored the taste, enjoying the blend of ground sader and peppers that flavored it. Kirke was a plain-looking man with big shoulders, rust-colored hair, and a thick mustache that made him appear to frown. His hair was cropped short in the Shoreland style, but he still hadn't lost his Inlander way of speaking. Scooping up a hunk of bread, he dabbed it in the stew and chewed, wondering how long the stores in the basement would last.

Allavin Devers' last visit had not been very encouraging, and for days after he'd left, Blain had wondered if the woodsman was right. He shouldn't have wasted his time thinking about it. Allavin knew the Bandit army's movements better than anyone else. If he said there was trouble coming to the Shoreland, there would be trouble.

Travelers from the north had all but stopped in the last fortnight, causing no small amount of worry to the local innkeepers. Blain had enough Aralonian pieces to hold out for a lot longer than that. He was able to eat his dinner without the gut-gnawing worry of a man about to lose everything to the Shae moneylenders. But still, the lack of word from the north worried him.

Taking a sip from his tankard of ale, he watched the slow pace of the kitchen as they prepared early for the evening meals. He shook his head. He didn't want to let any of the serving girls go. It was too soon for that anyway. They were good girls, but he'd lost Nerissa to some seedy pub in Windrift not many months ago. The others just weren't as good as her and struggled to bring in the share of coins that Nerissa's smile had brought them.

Dabbing a hunk of bread in the stew, he continued eating, wanting to be finished before the real crowds started. He always liked to wander and observe during the mealtime, to see what dishes worked and which didn't. It wasn't an easy business, and complaints spread faster than sewer fumes.

Tanita approached him from behind. "Blain, there's a girl here to see you."

He glanced over his shoulder. "I can't hire anyone," he answered. "Who let her go? That sneering wretch Bissom?"

She shook her head. "She said Allavin Devers sent her."

Blain brushed his hands together and then wiped the crumbs from his mustache. "Bring her on back. Be quick about it." He'd finish the goose later.

Leaning back in his chair, he folded his big arms and stared at the door. Tanita brought the girl into the kitchen and pointed him out. She nodded, smiled a quick thank you, and then hurried over to the table. Her boots were muddy, her clothes a mess, and her hair was tangled and damp.

"Sit down, lass," he said, pushing the other chair over with the toe of his boot so she could join him. "Looks like you're in trouble."

She nodded, leaning forward and looking at him with the nicest brown eyes he'd seen in a long time. A good scrubbing with soap, and he could imagine what she would look like underneath. A pretty girl, no doubt about that.

"I've a warning to give you," she said, keeping her voice low enough so that only he would

hear. Her hand rested near his plate. "A warning for my friends. Please, they're in danger and don't know it."

He frowned. "Are they bringing trouble here?"

"It's not their fault," she promised. "But Allavin Devers said I could trust you."

"We've known each other a long time, lass. Is he coming back to Landmoor?"

She nodded with exhaustion. "He'll be coming this way looking for me…for us. But he's not safe here. They'll be looking here, too."

"Who are you talking about?" he asked, feeling a protective urge awaken. He was a big man and never relied on hired hands to remove rowdy customers.

She bit her lip and her shoulders sagged. "I came here with a knight from Owen Draw. He's been arrested by the guard at the gate. And I saw a Bandit officer there, in the barracks."

"Sweet Achrolese," Blain murmured. "In the city?"

"Yes. One of the guards was supposed to bring me here, but I could tell we weren't going the right way. He was taking me into the western quarter, and I knew your place was by the north gates." She looked down at her hands. "I left him in an alley with a bruise on his forehead. When he wakes up, they'll look for me here. I can't stay. But Allavin will be coming with friends of mine. Two Shae and a Drugaen. You've got to warn them that the Bandits are already in the city."

"I can do that easy enough, lass." He leaned back and rubbed his mouth. "How long ago did you hit the guard? You came right here?"

"It took me a little while to find your inn," she replied. "Longer than I'd hoped. They could be walking in any moment."

"Don't fret about that. You look hungry…here, finish this." He scooted the plate over to her and watched her tear into it ravenously. She licked her fingers and gulped down a few deep swallows of ale.

He rose from the table and waived Tanita over. "Keep watch for the city guard. Let me know if anyone comes. Stall them. Keep quiet about the girl." Tanita nodded and slipped away, spreading the word in whispers to the other serving girls.

Blain looked over his shoulder and saw her stuffing the last of the bread in her mouth while coming to her feet. He went over to her and shook his head. "You're bone weary, lass. Rest a moment and let's talk."

She shook her head. "I didn't come to bring you trouble. I…I just didn't know how to get them a message. I've got to hide, find a place where they won't look…"

"Sit down," he said, guiding her back to the chair. He sat down and rested his elbows on the table. "I don't know if the governor is involved or not. I'm sure he'd want to know, but I don't dare risk telling him myself. Allavin warned me about this the last time he was here. And there have been rumors that the Bandits are thick in the woods these days. Two of my suppliers haven't been back from Dos-Aralon as scheduled." He rubbed his forehead. "I haven't seen Allavin Devers since his last warning. When did you leave him?"

Her eyes looked haunted. "Allavin joined us in Castun. The Bandit army is on the edge of the Shadows Wood. Right now, not ten miles from here. We crossed it last night to get here."

"Sweet Achrolese," he muttered again.

"They're coming to Landmoor," she said seriously. "Ban it, they're already inside!" She sunk her head in her hands. "We were too late. Too late."

He put his hand on her shoulder. "You're safe here, lass. I won't turn you over to the guard."

"But I can't just wait here," she said, clenching her fists. He saw the raw tenacity in her eyes.

"I've got a room upstairs that overlooks three streets down. Why don't you go up there and rest a bit. I can get you out the back in case they come. But if they don't come for a while, you'll need the rest. Just look at you." He sighed and then remembered his poor manners. "I'm Blain Kirke, as you already knew. What's your name?"

She looked up, gave him a weary smile, and told him.

* * *

Ticastasy blew the tiny lamp flame out and the room was smothered in darkness. Putting the warm brass lamp on the small table by the bed, she crossed to the curtained window. The bustle of the inn jutted against the walls. After listening for several moments, she parted the curtain. The back street was dark. Once the sun had set it was shielded by shadows from the city walls that the street lanterns did not penetrate.

Letting the curtain fall back in place, she went to the plush bed. Blain Kirke had put her in one of the nicest rooms, and she looked at the soft, stuffed mattress longingly. She stared at herself in the mirror at the foot of the bed. At least she looked like herself again, instead of the mud-spattered waif who had wandered in hours earlier.

Moving back to the window, she parted the curtain again, glancing for signs of anyone in the alley beyond. There had been no word all afternoon. Nothing from Allavin. Nothing from Sturnin, though she expected he had been put away quietly. Not even the city guard had come by the Wee Kirke. That made her worry even more, but it also gave her direction. She wasn't a threat to their plans. Anger boiled inside of her. Not a threat? She'd lived in Sol long enough to know how a city garrison worked. There would be a guard change not long after dusk. That was when they moved prisoners to the main jail. If anyone had been captured at the gate, they would be brought there then. And the only way to find that out would be to watch and follow. Ticastasy was good at both.

Finding the street empty, she tugged at the metal window brace. It unfastened with a faint creak, and she pushed the window open. The chilled night air blew past her cheeks and she inhaled through her nose. Stuffing the small iron room key deeper into her pockets, she hopped up on the sill and slid her legs over the edge. She jumped the little distance from the corner of the roof to the ground and scanned each end of the street. It was empty. Lifting the hood of her cloak over her hair, she walked to the rear of the inn.

Landmoor was quiet, except for the fragments of song that drifted by on the breeze. Would they be drinking themselves into oblivion if they knew an army camped a few miles into the forest? The smooth cobblestone felt hard compared with the soft dirt and grass she had trampled walking through the fog. She shook her head, remembering the day Quickfellow had come.

The day her life had gone upside-down.

After reaching the end of the inn, she turned and hurried until she found the northern wall of the city. It was huge and towering, and she brushed her hand against the cool stone. She followed the wall to the west, hidden in a slice of its shadow. Her keen ears picked out the steady footsteps of the soldiers patrolling the top of it.

She walked slowly, avoiding the tall patches of weeds that popped through the edge of cobbles. She was not sure how well the sentries could hear and didn't want to risk the stalks whisking against her boots. A few buildings sagged against the wall and she had to skirt around them, but she kept going west until she reached the huge northern gatehouse. Wisps of mist crept from the south streets, and she quickened her step. The Valairus fog would help her hide, but she hoped she didn't

get lost in it. Mist thickened around her, roaming the gutters first, swirling around her ankles until it was part of her. Those from the Shoreland were intimate with it. She greeted it like a friend.

She reached the junction of the north gate. Tugging her cloak close, she stood at the crossroads of the gatehouse and watched. Torches glared from the wall sconces. The portcullis was still closed, and so were the inner doors. The fortress was clamped shut for the night, just as it happened in Sol every night.

Ticastasy waited, shivering in the night air. Before an hour had passed, she saw the barrack doors open in the rear. In the light of the doorframe, she saw the same Bandit officer glance outside and then motion for the guards. Emerging from within, she watched twelve soldiers wearing the colors of Dos-Aralon escort Sturnin Goff away. His armor had been stripped from him and he wore a stained tunic and trousers. His hands were locked together in irons, and chains around his ankles dragged and scraped against the stone. There was a determined and angry look in his eyes, but he followed in the midst of the soldiers and disappeared down a street to the west.

The barrack doors closed. Counting the steps in her mind, she followed. She padded on cat's feet, anxious not to be heard but hurrying to catch up to the watch. They kept an even pace and joked amongst themselves. She was relieved that Sturnin was all by himself. Maybe Allavin and Flent were huddling outside the walls with Justin and Quickfellow. Maybe they would try and enter Landmoor in the morning. When the guards turned abruptly, she kept pace. They were off the main road now, heading down a twisting alley. She kept her distance. They walked for several miles before reaching a walled garden. This was unusual. The city jail would be near the center of town at the bottom of the town's keep. The guards had taken Sturnin to the western quarter. She swallowed worriedly. She was near where the guard had tried to take her. At the end of the alley, they passed beneath a wrought-iron arch. A lock and chains secured the gate, which they re-fastened behind them after passing. Waiting a few moments, she scrabbled up the corner of the gate and jumped down onto the soft grass. Shadowy trees appeared through the fog on each side, and the soaked grass cushioned her boots. Silently, she wove between the trees inside a walled park.

The mist fell away around a stone well in the center of the park. There was a large pillared gazebo nearby with stone benches and small footpaths spreading away from it like wagon spokes. The cool sigh of trickling water came from the deep stone throat of the well. A rusted steel rail encircled it. At two ends, tall stone blocks rose about eye-level, fixed across with a metal rod and a crank. A heavy chain sank into the well's mouth.

The guards approached the well and one looked down inside it. "Someone's been down and forgot to let it up," he mumbled. He grabbed the crank and gave it a hard jerk. The groan of metal scraping against stone sounded and something deep within the well shuddered.

Ticastasy heard the groans of chains quicken and then slow, ending with a click. Six of the twelve men stepped over the metal rail. Her eyes widened further when they didn't fall. She watched as Sturnin was hefted over the stone rim. One of them jerked on the crank again and the six began to sink into the well shaft.

As they disappeared below, the six remaining guards waited until they were down before abandoning the park. They passed by her in the shadows and fog. She waited until she could no longer hear the sound of their boots. The creaking gate closed, and she heard chains drag and a lock clamp and click. Where had they taken Sturnin Goff in the middle of the garden? There was something below the city – tunnels or passageways. Ticastasy emerged from the trees and hurried to the edge of the well. The warm orange glow from a lantern slowly disappeared down a tunnel at the bottom of the shaft. She looked deep into the park. Where did the tunnel lead? She was pretty good

at tripping a lock. If she could free the knight, they would be able to get out together.

She clenched her teeth, trying not to be afraid. Climbing over the rail, she grabbed the cold chain and climbed hand over hand down the well shaft. She dropped down to the floor of the well and waited, listening.

Voices.

Ticastasy looked around, hearing men approaching from a tunnel coming the other way. Fear danced in her blood and she tried to swallow. There was nowhere to hide, and these men were carrying torches. This is foolish, she decided. She gripped the chain and started climbing back up, listening to them approach. Torchlight flickered down the bend. Hand over hand she climbed the chain.

"Who are you?" a man demanded, grabbing her by the fringe of her cloak as she reached the top of the well. She saw his tunic and recognized the man as a Kiran Thall. Hauling her out of the well, he shoved her to the ground. "Speak up, boy!" Jerking the cowl away, he looked down at her face.

"You're a bloody girl!" he swore with surprise.

Ticastasy kicked his legs up from underneath him. Grabbing her small knife, she backed away as he scrambled for his feet. She kicked him in the mouth, knocking him over with a flop. Four more men emerged through the mist ahead of her.

"Hate," she swore, her stomach clenching with fear.

"Who's that over…?" The voice changed with alarm. "By the well!"

She ran.

The Kiran Thall shouted and went after her. She ran through the gazebo, bounding over the rail and ducked from a low-hanging tree branch. She cut north immediately, not wanting to lose her direction. The gate was locked. She'd need time to climb it. The Kiran Thall sprinted hard after her. The fastest came like a barking dog. She turned left, cutting so hard she brushed against another tree. The soldier grunted as he smacked into it, but he recovered and quickly cut her off.

"This way!" he called over his shoulder to the others.

She twisted around another tree to try and lose him again in the slick grass. But the Kiran Thall grabbed a fistful of her cloak and jerked her towards him. Colliding against her body, he pulled her in with his other arm and tried to hold her as she flailed.

"Hold tight there," he said and then yelped with pain as she stabbed him in the hollow of his thigh. Ticastasy broke free and ran, but he caught her boot and tripped her. She struck the ground hard enough to see spots explode in her eyes. With a grunt of pain, she scrambled to her feet.

The Kiran Thall pressed his wound and hobbled after her, catching her arm as she tried to escape. She kicked his ankle up from under him and swung the dagger around, cutting his chin. Her tunic ripped at the shoulder as he fell, but she jerked her arm free and ran as the other three soldiers joined the first.

The fog swallowed her. She heard them swearing and calling after her, but she didn't stop. Reaching the gate, she pulled herself up and over the ironwork and jumped onto the cobblestones below. She kept running as fast as she could. A needle of pain in her side made her slow, but still she jogged until she could no longer hear their voices. She hid in a side alley and waited. Chattering with cold, she chaffed her bruised arm and bit her lip to keep back the tears. She made it. She made it. Her heart felt like it was a bird wiggling to escape her chest.

She breathed more slowly. Pulling the cloak tighter, she raised the hood to cover her hair. Where were the Kiran Thall? How close behind? Her ears strained for sounds of pursuit, but she

heard nothing. She stood and started walking away. The soft brushing of the cloak against her hair was the only sound as she walked towards the main street where she could find the Wee Kirke again. The streets were nearly barren, but there were a few who had been drinking who sang and staggered down the way. Turning down a major street, she walked north until she recognized the weaponsmith shop. From there, she hurried around it to the alley it shared with the inn. The noises of the inn were still loud and boisterous. Letting down the cowl, she stepped up on the small stone ledge on the wall and pulled herself up on the roof. Carefully, she went to the window. It creaked softly. She paused, listening.

All was silent.

Planting her palms on the window sill, Ticastasy jumped up and sat on the edge. Sliding her legs inside the room, she dropped to the floor. Her hands trembled as she lit the lamp and trimmed it.

There was an old man in black robes standing against the door, regarding her with interest. She froze.

"There is someone waiting to see you, my dear," he said. The window swung shut by itself and the latch fastened.

XXIX

Allavin Devers dropped to a crouch and touched the thin outline of a bootprint in the soft hillside dirt. He traced two of his fingers along the earth and then pointed to a bent clump of stettleweed and another bootprint. He smiled up at Flent. "Thealos is banned good at stepwalking. I almost didn't see these."

"What about Justin?" Flent asked, folding his arms. He looked off into the mist and scrunched up his shoulders.

"His trail is hard to follow too, but he's still with Thealos." Allavin gazed into the mist. "The tracks are about two hours old. We've made good time catching up."

Flent dropped down on his knee and studied the print. "No Kiran Thall?"

"No Kiran Thall," the tracker agreed.

"That's good." He wiped his nose.

Allavin kept low to the earth and followed the set of prints he had re-discovered. Kiran Thall had crisscrossed the trail several times since the two Shae had left the Shadows Wood, but they didn't appear to have picked it up. Allavin was careful and had to keep reminding Flent to step on hard clumps of moor grass rather than the soft mud of the slopes. The trail led them towards the river, curling around the western face of the hill where Landmoor sat. With all the mist that morning, their movements were hidden.

"Doesn't make any sense," Allavin mused, scratching the back of his neck. "Looks like they're wandering around the base rather than trying to find the Iron Point Road."

Flent stared up at the thinning mists. "Maybe they're lost."

"It's possible. The mist was thicker when they were here, and they don't know the valley that well. Hmmm. Look over there, now that's...those are horse tracks. Hate!"

Allavin and Flent hurried over to the tromping mess of hoofprints and smashed grass. "At least a dozen riders. Maybe more, it's pretty messy. Sons of fire, they caught the trail right here," he cursed.

Flent withdrew his heavy axe and patted it against his palm. "Can you tell what happened?"

"Give me a moment," Allavin replied, bending near the earth and studying the web of tracks. He was careful to skirt around the mess of churned mud and grasses and waved Flent over to join him. "No, they just found the trail. Lucky fools, just stumbled onto it. Ban!" Allavin fumed. He and Flent were still two hours behind the two Shae, and the Kiran Thall tracks were fresher than that. They were still too far from the city's northern gatehouse. He couldn't understand why they weren't looking for the road.

"Come on," Allavin said, preparing his long bow. He bent forward, not bothering to conceal his own tracks, and followed the trail of tracks around the side of the hill.

The mist thinned quickly. Allavin jogged, slowing his pace evenly so that Flent could keep up with him. The Drugaen stared ahead into the mist, searching. The mist and the sharp angle of the hill slope concealed sounds very well.

The noise of hooves thudding in the dirt came from directly ahead just moments before a riderless horse cantered out of the mist, its reins dragging in the moor grass. Allavin dropped to one

knee and almost brought it down with an arrow, but he saw that the animal wandered aimlessly. A quiver of crossbow shafts hung from the saddle horn along with riding supplies and a blanket. Frowning, Allavin looked at Flent and motioned to follow. What was going on?

Just around the next outcropping of rock, he had his answer.

The Kiran Thall lay dead. The horses had already scattered, but the riders lay in their blood. Flent looked at the mess with stern eyes, gripping the axe haft, ready to fight. It had been over for a while. Allavin spied a cave in the side of the rock. An inlet of some kind. The Kiran Thall were in heaps all around it. He approached one of the fallen horsemen that had an arrow protruding from his ribs. Stepping on the man's chest, he yanked the arrow out. A broadhead. One of Thealos'. He quickly scanned the number of dead. Eleven in all.

"How in Keasorn's name…" the tracker stammered and then saw another of the dead. The words caught in his throat.

The air smelled sick with blood and charred flesh. The flies were just finding the spot. By noon, they would be swarming. But what turned the tracker's stomach wasn't the blood. Staring down at another fallen horsemen, he saw a man with a smoking black hole in his chest. The man's face was transfixed with terror. Allavin blinked, vividly remembering the look on Tiryn's face when he died – the same frozen expression of agony. Seven others were dead, struck by some fiery magic. Judging from the tracks, it looked as though one Kiran Thall had made it away alive. The others were downed by arrows.

Allavin crouched next to the body. In his mind's eye, he saw the flash of blue lightning as it struck his Shae companions one by one. Such awful, terrible magic. The blue light still burned behind his eyes. Then he remembered something else.

"Justin," he said in a near whisper.

"Justin did this?" Flent demanded, prodding the dead man with his boot.

Allavin stared into the inlet of stone and felt a coldness in his bones. Maybe Jaerod was wrong about the Warder Shae being an ally.

* * *

"They're close!" Thealos hissed in Silvan, struggling to keep up with the Warder Shae. "I can't tell how many horsemen."

Justin never slowed. "They mean nothing to us. Quickly now. We are near the entrance."

"Are you sure?" Thealos asked. His lungs heaved from the run. Justin didn't even appear winded. He glanced over his shoulder, expecting to see the Kiran Thall come bounding out of the mist. "If we run towards the river, we can lose them again."

"They are nothing!" Justin snapped. "Here we are. Follow me. We will deal with the humans here."

Thealos followed around a large outcropping of rock. The hill angled steeply on this side. He couldn't see the walls of Landmoor – at least not yet. But he felt the shape of the hill rising up like a mountain into the thick whirl of fog. Justin stopped at a small stone inlet at the base of the hill. The Warder Shae rubbed his hand along the smooth rock covered with thick moss. Tangled weeds littered the base of the hill, some nearly as tall as the reeds by the river.

"This is the hidden entrance?" Thealos asked, studying the thick ruff of moss. It was rust-colored and slick. Certainly not Everoot. He put his hand on it, feeling the wetness and tickling texture of the moss.

–Son of Quicksilver–

Thealos jerked his hand away.

"Yes, one of the hidden ones," Justin explained, looking up at the archway. "It leads to the tunnels beneath the city. That is where you will find your proof. The humans roam the halls, but we will not be seen by them." He scowled. "This is what is left of my home," he added with bitterness.

Thealos stared at the wall. He felt a presence, a whispering through the earth that spoke to him. It was like sensing Silvan magic, except the feeling was so strong that it emanated from the rock itself. Like feeling the heat from a flame on his face – he knew it was there, but for some reason he couldn't touch it. He glanced at Justin, but the Warder seemed oblivious to it.

The stomping of horsemen approached in the thick swirling mists. Thealos brought up his hunting bow and nocked a broadhead. "They usually have crossbows," he warned.

The Warder Shae stood at the entrance of the tunnel, his back to the hillside. His arms were loose at his sides, his head bowed. Thealos felt the prickle and smell of earth magic rise up from the moorlands, drawing into Justin like water. The first horsemen appeared out of the fog, the rider a Kiran Thall. The horse shied and the rider controlled it. His crossbow leveled at them. Others appeared, forming a half-circle, pinning them against the inlet. Thealos swallowed, keeping his bow ready, watching the lead soldier.

Justin raised his head and looked at them. His eyes were glowing.

"Put down the bow…" the soldier started when a streak of blue lightning sprang from Justin's hands, throwing the rider off the horse. The gelding shrieked, flailing hooves madly in the air. Kiran Thall shouldered their crossbows and triggered the releases. Thealos shut his eyes and flinched, but the bolts spattered harmlessly against the rocks behind them. The blue lightning struck again, smashing into another soldier, killing him.

The rush of earth magic in the air smelled like taper shavings. Justin channeled the magic, bringing it to being inside him before loosing it on the humans with crackling swiftness. Thealos let the arrow loose, dropping a rider. He took aim again and again, catching more as they whirled to flee. Justin brought down the rest. When it was finished, a haze of acrid smoke lingered in the air.

The Warder Shae lowered his hands and the earth magic settled back down into the grass and mud. Thealos stared at him in awe. "I thought that only worked against Forbidden magic," he whispered, remembering the Krag Drugaen in the Shadows Wood. He watched Justin's shoulders slump. He looked even frailer. "Does it…hurt you?"

A half-smile twitched on Justin's mouth. "It's not without a price," he answered. "It never is." He examined the field of the dead and then turned dispassionately to Thealos. "There is no time to bury them. I do not have the strength for it. Follow me."

Thealos joined him at the inlet of stone. He stared at the sculptured walls, squinting in the shade. There was a feeling beneath the scrub of moss. A familiar feeling. Mud and debris littered the stone floor. Thealos looked around, gazing at the structure. "This was a holy place?" he whispered.

"The ruins of a shrine," Justin explained. "The humans have already desecrated it. They use it to bring the Everoot into the tunnels. So many of them." He shook his head and glared contemptuously. "It would destroy me to kill that many. Come, this way."

Thealos paused, feeling a whisper of magic beneath his boots. Calling to him. A prickle of apprehension went down his spine. Not a Sleepwalker – but the presence of Silvan magic.

–Son of Quicksilver–

"Do you hear anything?" Thealos asked, catching up with Justin.

The Warder Shae cocked his head. "No."

Thealos nodded and followed him down a narrow path carved into the rock, leading to a stretch of stone steps. They started up towards the ruins of the Shae watchpost buried within the hillside.

* * *

It was difficult for Thealos to concentrate on anything except the constant murmurings of the magic. A presence in the broken tunnels, the magic twisted loose his feelings and thoughts. Thealos recognized Silvan symbols carved into the rock. The markings were centuries old, detailing the layout of the ruined watchpost. The floor was broken and uneven, which made the journey difficult. Portions of the tunnels had collapsed, exposing hunks of stone from the upper floors. Thealos folded his arms for warmth in the clammy passageways. Moonstones glowed faintly on the floor and walls, offering just enough light for their Shae eyes to see. Muddy puddles collected in cracks and seams, and corridors split off from the main one the deeper in they went. It had the feeling of a tomb and sent cold chills up Thealos' arms.

–I am the Silverkin Crystal–

Thealos listened and felt another shudder of apprehension. It was a voice no louder than the softest whisper, but it sent shivers through his skin and a burning feeling inside his chest. It invoked feelings so strongly that he blinked back tears. He was terrified of what it was doing to him. It knew he was there. It called to him soothingly, yet the power beneath it was frightening. It wanted to be freed from the warding. It sensed Forbidden magic and wanted to destroy it.

–Come, Son of Quicksilver–

Thealos squeezed his eyes shut, trying to banish the voice inside his head. He knew where it was. Just touching the stone wall, he felt its pulse, its life. The magic was alive, there was no doubt in that. It was awake and needful. The Crystal needed him as much as he needed it. Thealos didn't tell Justin what he was feeling. The way the Crystal spoke to him was private and personal.

The slope of the tunnels rose at a steep angle in several stretches, bringing them higher up the hillside. Thealos had no idea how far they had traveled or how high up they were, but deep ahead in the tunnels he heard voices. Justin paused for a moment and then motioned for Thealos.

"There are side passages to avoid the humans," the Warder explained. "Follow me."

Turning to the right, they circled around the main tunnel and followed the twisting passageways. The tunnels were full of rooms without any doors. Moisture dripped from the ceiling tiles, splunking noises that irritated Thealos. The sound of the Bandit soldiers grew sharper as they went, but it came from the main passageway. Reaching the end of the new corridor, they stopped to investigate.

At least fifty men carrying heavy oak chests worked their burdens down the main passage. Even from afar, Thealos could feel the Silvan magic contained within the chests. They were full of Everoot. Justin scowled, studying the humans with disdain. The soldiers walked away from the main corridor, up a path lit with brilliant torchlight. Justin's eyes reflected the light and glowed in the darkness.

"That tunnel you see – it is the main crossroads on this side of the city," Justin whispered. "It leads to the rest of the tunnels in the center. The humans have made different entrances to the tunnels from above. I have not explored them all, but it is sufficient to say that they can enter the ruins of this Watchpost easily."

Thealos pressed his hand against the wall and felt the magic sing to him. "Where is the ward-

ing?" he asked.

"Down the corridor we were on – this one," he said, pointing. "But it is guarded by an Otsquare. You may not be able to enter it."

Thealos nodded, but he didn't doubt it for a moment. The whispering voices in his mind gave him the confidence that he could. "Show it to me."

After watching the Bandits disappear down the side aisle leading towards the center of the city, the two Shae left their shelter and took to the main passage again.

–I have been waiting for you–

Thealos clenched his teeth, feeling the presence of the magic grow stronger. The tunnel became less disturbed the further they went. Fewer muddied tracks littered the floor, showing that the halls were seldom patrolled. Thealos felt the kinship with the Crystal more keenly, its need growing even stronger. How far away was it? It felt close.

It was like walking into an ice-crusted pond. The tunnel hadn't changed, but a biting wash of dread struck Thealos in the pit of the stomach. Justin hesitated, too.

"What was that?" Thealos whispered. The reek of Forbidden magic curled around him like smoke.

"We just breached a warding," Justin replied.

"What did it do?"

The Warder Shae frowned. "I don't know. It wasn't here before."

Thealos looked back the way they came. "I don't like this."

Justin nodded. "It was put here by someone for a reason. But not to stop us. A Death Warding would have been instant. This one is...different. As if to warn someone we were here."

Thealos gripped the hilt of his weapon. "Are we almost there?"

Again Justin nodded. Together, they started jogging down the rest of the tunnel. The presence of Forbidden magic grew stronger and stronger. A cold sweat began to form on Thealos' forehead. The smell of the Forbidden magic drowned out everything but the Crystal's voice. It only intensified.

–I will protect you from the Firekin–

Faster!

The broken floor tiles tripped him, almost spilling Thealos to the ground. He kept his balance and pressed onward. The smell of Forbidden magic made him want to retch. He nearly did. Justin also looked queasy, and he brought up his hands into a defensive position. Earth magic swelled around him, but it was pale compared to the intensity of the power ahead. He couldn't speak. Where was it? How much further? Far down the corridor, Thealos saw a blue light.

–I will protect you–

He knew what it was. Just ahead, amid the broken stones and putrid rock, he saw a stone archway suspended by two pillars sculpted like massive griffons. The light came from within the archway. It was as blue as the moon Eroth, except the light was painful to look at. Like staring at the sun at noonday.

Squinting, Thealos approached the pillars. The light drowned out details, blurring the pathway to follow. He felt the Crystal screaming to him, louder and louder. He could not make out the words, but he felt the impact of them. Something wasn't right. It was warning him, beckoning him to rush to seize the magic entombed inside. Thealos wanted to scream.

Something moved in the blue light.

Both of the Shae stopped, trying to get a look at it. The raw shadow of Forbidden magic

knifed into them.

"No," Justin warned, his eyes bulging with panic.

Thealos recognized the presence. He had felt it during the night in the Bandit camp. The awareness that he was there, that he was a Shae. Thealos froze. It was a Sorian.

The Sorian stood before the stone pillars, cold and aloof. He was medium-sized for a human, with jade green eyes. His black robes seemed to smother the blue light shrieking behind him past the portal. Thealos couldn't move. Fear guttered out any resolve to run.

The Warder Shae raised his hands, but his thin arms were trembling.

The Sorian stepped forward, his green eyes locked on them both.

"Go," Justin whispered to Thealos.

Thealos couldn't move.

"Go!"

Magic exploded from Justin's hands, rushing to close the gap between them and the Sorian. The blast had destroyed the Kiran Thall one by one, but the Sorian held up his hand, revealing an orb the color of fire. The orb simply swallowed Justin's attack. He continued forward.

Justin sent a stronger wave of magic, trying to stall the advance. The magic hammered at the Sorian, but the orb deflected it, sending it spraying away from the green-eyed man, shattering rock and sending shudders through the tunnels. The orb flared once and the Warder Shae's magic winked out, tamed and controlled. Justin's face twisted with horror. The Sorian gave him a small glance, and Justin slammed into the rock wall before crumpling to the floor.

Thealos' breath came in quick gasps. Fear weighed on him like a heavy mantle. He was going to die. His legs were still rooted to the floor. He slid the Wolfsman blade out of his belt and felt the cool tingle of earth magic swell in his arm.

The Sorian gave him an amused smile. The orb flared once and suddenly the blade was white-hot. Thealos gasped with pain and dropped it, soothing his burned hand. The blade clattered to the floor, twisted and warping as the magic destroyed it.

Glancing down at Justin's still body on the floor, the Sorian looked up and gave Thealos an arch look. "You can walk or I can drag you," he said in perfect Silvan, his voice soft and subdued. "But either way, you are coming with me."

To be concluded in the November 2002 issue of *Deep Magic*...

Leave a message about this story.